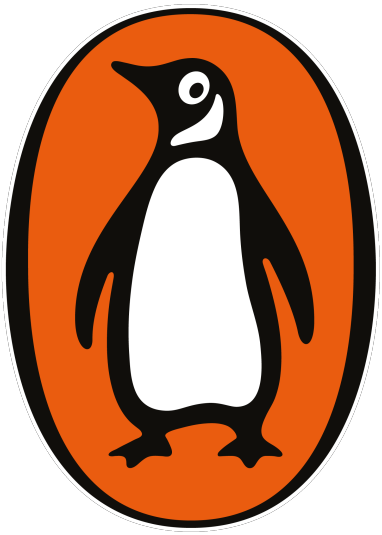
GEORGES

SIMENON

Maigret and the Minister

INSPECTOR MAIGRET



Georges Simenon

MAIGRET AND THE MINISTER

Translated by ROS SCHWARTZ

Contents

1. The Explosive Calame Report

2. The Telephone Call from the President

3. The Stranger in the Little Bar

4. Lucas is Not Pleased

5. The Professor’s Scruples

6. Lunch at the Filet de Sole

7. Maigret’s Taxis

8. The Trip to Seineport

9. The Night at the Ministry

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

> My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points … 'understand and judge not'.

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1. The Explosive Calame Report

As always when he returned home at night, Maigret paused at the same place, just past the gas lamp, and looked up at the lit windows of his apartment. He was no longer even aware of doing so. Had he been asked point-blank if there was a light on or not, he might have been uncertain. Also out of habit, on the stairs between the second and the third floor, he would start unbuttoning his overcoat to take the key from his trouser pocket, even though the door invariably opened the moment he stepped on to the mat. These rituals established over the years mattered to him more than he cared to admit. For instance, his wife had a particular way of taking his wet umbrella from his hands at the same time as inclining her head to kiss him on the cheek, although she didn't this evening because it wasn't raining.

As usual, he asked:

'No telephone calls?'

Closing the door, she replied:

'Yes, there was one. I'm afraid there's no point taking off your coat.'

The day had been overcast, neither cold nor warm, with a sudden downpour at around two o'clock in the afternoon. At Quai des Orfèvres, Maigret had done nothing but deal with routine matters.

'Did you have a nice dinner?'

The light in their apartment was cosier, more intimate than at the office. He could see the newspapers and his slippers waiting by his armchair.

‘I had dinner at the Brasserie Dauphine with the chief, Lucas and Janvier.’

Then the four of them had gone to the Police Association meeting. For the past three years, Maigret had been elected vice chairman despite his unwillingness.

‘You have time for a cup of coffee. You might as well take off your coat. I said you wouldn’t be home before eleven.’

It was half past ten. The meeting had not lasted long. A small group of them had gone for a beer in a brasserie and Maigret had come home on the Métro.

‘Who telephoned?’

‘A minister.’

Standing in the middle of the living room, he frowned at her.

‘Which minister?’

‘The one for public works. His name is Point, if I heard him correctly.’

‘Auguste Point, yes. He telephoned here? In person?’

‘Yes.’

‘Didn’t you tell him to call Quai des Orfèvres?’

‘It’s you he wants to speak to. He needs to see you right away. When I told him you weren’t home, he asked if I was the maid. He sounded annoyed. I said I was Madame Maigret. He apologized and wanted to know where you were, when you’d be back. He gave me the impression he was a shy man.’

‘That’s not his reputation.’

‘He even asked me whether I was alone or not. Then he explained that his phone call must remain a secret, that he wasn’t telephoning from the ministry but from a public booth, and that he needed to talk to you as soon as possible.’

All the time she was speaking Maigret looked at her, still frowning, with an expression that spoke volumes about his distaste for politics. On several occasions, over the course of his career, a statesman, deputy, senator or some high-up figure had requested his services, but always through the usual channels. Each time he had been called in to see the chief and, each time, the conversation had begun with:

‘I’m sorry, Maigret, I’m putting you in charge of a case you’re not going to like.’

And, invariably, they were rather unpleasant cases.

He did not know Auguste Point personally and had never seen

him in the flesh. He wasn't one of those politicians who were always in the papers.

'Why didn't he telephone HQ?'

He was talking more to himself, but Madame Maigret replied all the same:

'How should I know? I'm just repeating what he said to me. Firstly, that he was calling from a public booth …'

That detail had struck Madame Maigret, for whom a government minister was a person of considerable importance, and she found it hard to imagine him going into a public phone booth on some street corner at night.

'… then, that you were not to go to the ministry, but to his private apartment …'

She glanced at a piece of paper on which she'd scribbled a few words.

'… 27, Boulevard Pasteur. You don't need to disturb the concierge. It's on the fourth floor, the left-hand door.'

'Is he waiting there for me?'

'He'll wait as long as he has to. But he should be back at the ministry before midnight, to keep up appearances.'

Changing her tone, she asked:

'Do you think it's a prank?'

He shook his head. It was certainly unusual, odd, but it didn't sound like a prank.

'Are you going to drink your coffee?'

'No, thank you. Not on top of beer.'

He got up and poured himself a drop of sloe gin, took a fresh pipe from the mantelpiece and headed for the door.

'See you later.'

When he stepped out on to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, the damp that had been in the air all day began to condense into a dusty fog that formed a halo around the lights. He did not hail a taxi; it would be just as quick to get to Boulevard Pasteur by Métro. Perhaps his reluctance was also because he didn't feel this was official business.

All the way there, staring absently at a moustachioed gentleman opposite him who was reading the newspaper, he wondered what Auguste Point could want of him, and particularly why he wanted such an urgent and secretive meeting.

What he knew about Point was that he was a lawyer from Vendée

– from La Roche-sur-Yon, if he wasn't mistaken – who had entered politics late in life. He was one of those deputies elected after the war for their integrity and their conduct during the Occupation.

What he had done exactly, Maigret didn't know. The fact remained that while some of his colleagues passed through the Chamber without leaving any trace, Point had been re-elected time and again and had been given the public works portfolio three months earlier, during the formation of the latest cabinet.

Maigret had not heard any rumours about him, unlike most politicians who were dogged by gossip. His wife kept out of the public eye, and so did his children, if he had any.

By the time he emerged from the Métro at Pasteur, the fog had thickened and turned yellowish and Maigret recognized the dusty tang on his lips. He saw no one in the street but could hear footsteps in the distance, towards Montparnasse, and, from the same direction, a train whistling as it left the station.

Some windows were still lit and, in the haze, they exuded an air of calm, of security. These buildings, neither luxurious nor poor, neither new nor old, with apartments that were all very similar, were the homes of middle-class people – teachers, civil servants and office workers, who took their Métro or their bus at the same time every day.

He pressed the bell and, when the door opened, muttered an inaudible name as he made his way over to the lift.

The cramped two-person cage ascended slowly but smoothly and silently through the gloomy stairwell. The doors on each landing were painted the same dark brown, and the doormats were identical.

He rang the bell of the left-hand door, which opened at once, as if someone had been waiting, their hand on the knob.

Point took three steps forwards to send the lift back down, which Maigret had not thought to do.

'I apologize for having brought you out so late,' he muttered. 'Come this way …'

Madame Maigret would have been disappointed because he was as different as possible from how she imagined a minister. He was just like Maigret in height and build, only broader and more rugged. He looked like a farmer, and his strong features, his large nose and his mouth made Maigret think of a head carved out of chestnut.

He was wearing a greyish, nondescript suit and a ready-knotted tie. Two things were particularly striking: his bushy eyebrows, as wide and thick as a moustache, and the long hairs on his hands.

He looked Maigret up and down unashamedly, without even giving a polite smile.

'Have a seat, inspector.'

The apartment, smaller than Maigret's on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, could not have comprised more than two rooms, perhaps three, and a tiny kitchen. From the hall, where a few items of clothing hung, they went into a study that resembled a bachelor's lodgings. There were some pipes in a rack on the wall, ten or twelve, several of clay, and a very fine meerschaum. An old-fashioned writing desk, with pigeon-holes and lots of little drawers, like the one that had once belonged to Maigret's father, was strewn with papers and ash. He did not dare look at the photographs on the walls immediately – Point's father and mother, in the same black-and-gold frames that he would have found in a farmhouse in Vendée.

Sitting in his swivel chair, again just like the one Maigret's father used to have, Point casually caressed a box of cigars.

'I suppose …' he began.

Maigret smiled and muttered:

'I prefer my pipe.'

'Tobacco?'

The minister offered him an open packet of shag and re-lit a pipe he had allowed to go out.

'You must have been surprised when your wife told you …'

He was trying to find a way to begin the conversation but was not happy with his opening. Something quite strange was occurring. In the peaceful, warm study, the two of them, of the same build and around the same age, sat watching each other quite openly. It was as if they were discovering similarities, intrigued by the resemblance but hesitant to acknowledge each other as brothers.

'Listen, Maigret. There's no point speechifying. I only know you from reading about you in the papers and from what I've heard about you.'

'The same here, minister.'

Point gave a dismissive wave as if to say that there was no need for formality between them.

'I'm in a jam. So far, no one knows, no one has any idea; not the

president of the Council, not even my wife, who usually knows about everything I do. You're the person I called.'

He looked away for a moment and puffed on his pipe as if embarrassed by what he had just said, which might sound like flattery or self-interest.

'I didn't want to go through the usual channels and speak to the head of the Police Judiciaire. Contacting you directly is irregular. You weren't under any obligation to come, and you have no obligation to help me.'

He rose with a sigh.

'Will you have a little drink?'

And, with what could pass for a smile:

'Don't worry. I'm not trying to bribe you. It is just that this evening I really need a drink.'

He went into the adjacent room and came back with a bottle that had already been opened and two tumblers like those used in country inns.

'It's just the local brandy that my father distils every autumn. This one is around twenty years old.'

Glass in hand, they looked at one another.

'To your health.'

'To yours, minister.'

This time, Point did not appear to hear the last word.

'If I don't know where to begin, it's not because I feel awkward in front of you, but because it's difficult to tell the story clearly. Do you read the newspapers?'

'On evenings when the miscreants leave me the leisure.'

'Do you follow politics?'

'Not really.'

'You know that I am not what people call a politician?'

Maigret nodded.

'Right! You've heard, of course, about the Clairfond disaster?'

This time Maigret couldn't help giving a shudder, and a certain disappointment, a certain wariness must have shown on his face, because Point bowed his head, adding in a low voice:

'Unfortunately, that's what this is about.'

Earlier, in the Métro, Maigret had tried to guess what the minister wanted to talk to him about in secret. He hadn't thought of the Clairfond affair, which the papers had been full of for the past month.

The Clairfond sanatorium in Haute-Savoie, between Ugine and Megève, at an altitude of over 1,400 metres, was one of the most spectacular post-war constructions.

Maigret could not remember who had floated the idea of building for the most disadvantaged children an establishment on a par with modern private sanatoria, because it had been a few years back. There had been a lot of talk about it at the time. Some thought the motivation was purely political, and there had been heated arguments in the Chamber. A special committee had been set up to examine the project, which had eventually been built after years of opposition.

A month earlier, disaster had struck, one of the most appalling ever. The snows had begun to thaw earlier than had ever happened within living memory. The mountain torrents had swollen, as had a subterranean river, the Lize, such a minor river that it wasn't even on the maps, but it had undermined the foundations of an entire wing of Clairfond.

The investigation, begun immediately after the disaster, was still underway. The experts couldn't agree. And the newspapers, depending on their stripe, defended different theories.

One hundred and twenty-eight children had died when one of the buildings had collapsed, and the others had been urgently evacuated.

After a moment's silence, Maigret muttered:

'You weren't a member of the cabinet when Clairfond was built, were you?'

'No. I wasn't even a member of the parliamentary commission that voted to fund it. The fact is that until a few days ago, all I knew about the affair was what everyone else knows from the newspapers.'

He took a while.

'You've heard of the Calame Report, inspector?'

Maigret looked at him in surprise and shook his head.

'You will do. You'll probably hear too much about it. I don't suppose you read the weeklies, *La Rumeur*, for example?'

'Never.'

'Do you know Hector Tabard?'

'By name and reputation. My colleagues at Rue des Saussaies must know him better than I do.'

He was alluding to the Sûreté Nationale, which was often given

missions directly or indirectly related to politics since it was under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior.

Tabard was a corrupt journalist whom the weekly scandal sheet used when they wanted to blackmail someone.

'Read this, it was published six days after the tragedy.'

It was brief, enigmatic:

> *Will they decide, one day, under the pressure of public opinion, to disclose the contents of the Calame Report?*

'Is that all?' asked Maigret, surprised.

'Here's a quote from the following issue.'

> *Contrary to the generally accepted idea, it is not over foreign policy or because of the events in North Africa that the current government will be brought down before spring is out, but because of the Calame Report. Who is in possession of the Calame Report?*

The words 'Calame Report' sounded almost comical and Maigret smiled as he asked:

'Who is Calame?'

But Point was not smiling. Emptying his pipe into the huge copper ashtray, he explained:

'A professor at the École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées. He died two years ago, of cancer if I'm not mistaken. The public hasn't heard of him, but he's famous in the world of applied mechanics and civil engineering. Calame was sometimes brought in as a consultant on major projects, in countries as far afield as Japan and South America, and he was a leading authority on materials resistance, especially concrete. He wrote a book that neither you nor I have read but which all architects have, entitled *The Diseases of Concrete.*'

'Was Calame involved in the Clairfond project?'

'Indirectly. Let me tell you the story another way, according to a more personal sequence of events. At the time of the disaster, as I told you, I knew nothing of the sanatorium other than what I'd read in the newspapers. I couldn't even remember whether I'd voted for or against the project five years earlier. I had to check in *L'Officiel* to find that I'd voted for it. I don't read *La Rumeur* either. It was only after the second short item that the president of the Council took me aside and asked:

' "Are you familiar with the Calame Report?"

'I was honest with him and said no. He seemed surprised and I

felt he looked at me with some mistrust.

‘ “Well, it must be among your files,” he said.

‘Then he put me in the picture. During the debates on the Clairfond issue five years ago, since the parliamentary committee was divided, a deputy – I don’t know who – proposed commissioning a report from an engineer of unquestionable integrity.

‘He suggested Professor Julien Calame, of the École des Ponts et Chaussées, and Calame spent a while examining the plans and even visited the site in Haute-Savoie.

‘Then he wrote a report which should have been passed on to the committee.’

Maigret believed he had understood.

‘Was the report damning?’

‘Wait. When the president spoke to me about the affair, he had already ordered a search through the parliamentary archives. The report should have been among the committee’s files. But not only is it not there, some of the minutes of the meetings have also disappeared.

‘Do you see what that means?’

‘That there are certain people who have a vested interest in that report never being published?’

‘Read this.’

It was another cutting from *La Rumeur*, also short, but no less threatening:

> *Will Monsieur Arthur Nicoud be powerful enough to prevent the Calame Report from seeing the light of day?*

Maigret knew that name as he knew hundreds of others. He had heard of the firm Nicoud & Sauvegrain, because their name cropped up almost everywhere there were public works – roads, bridges or locks.

‘It’s Nicoud & Sauvegrain that built Clairfond.’

Maigret began to wish he hadn’t come. While he felt a natural sympathy for Auguste Point, the story that the minister was telling him made him feel as ill at ease as when he heard smutty stories being told in front of a woman.

He couldn’t help trying to guess the role that Point might have played in the tragedy that had cost the lives of 128 children. He was on the verge of asking him outright:

‘What is your part in all this?’

He guessed that a lot of people were implicated – politicians, prominent figures perhaps.

‘I shall try to be brief. The president asked me to undertake a painstaking search through the archives of my ministry. The École des Ponts et Chaussées comes directly under the Ministry of Public Works. Logically, we should have at the very least a copy of the Calame Report somewhere in our files.’

The famous words came back: *Calame Report.*

‘You didn’t find anything?’

‘Nothing. We rummaged through tons of dusty papers, even in the attics.’

Uncomfortable in his armchair, Maigret was beginning to fidget, and Point noticed.

‘You don’t like politics?’

‘I admit it.’

‘Neither do I. Strange as that may seem, the reason I agreed to stand for election twelve years ago was to fight against politics. And when I was invited to become a member of the cabinet three months ago, again it was with the intention of cleaning up public affairs that I allowed myself to be persuaded. My wife and I are simple people. As you can see from our Paris home, where we’ve been staying when parliament is in session ever since I was elected a deputy. It’s more of a bachelor pad. My wife could have stayed in La Roche-sur-Yon, where we have our house, but we’re not used to being apart.’

He spoke matter-of-factly, without any sentimentality in his voice.

‘Since I’ve been a minister our official home has been in the ministry, on Boulevard Saint-Germain, but we escape here as often as we can, especially on Sundays.

‘But none of this matters. If I called from a public telephone booth, as your wife must have told you – because, unless I’m mistaken, your wife is very much like mine – if I called you from a public telephone booth, as I was saying, it is because I’m wary of phone-tapping. Rightly or wrongly, I am convinced that my calls from the ministry, perhaps those from this apartment too, are being recorded somewhere, I’d rather not know where. What’s more, I’m not too proud to confess that on the way here I entered a cinema on the Boulevards via one door and exited via another, and switched

taxis twice. I still couldn't swear that the building isn't under surveillance.'

'I didn't see anyone when I arrived.'

Now Maigret felt a sort of pity. Until now, Point had tried to speak in a detached tone. But on getting down to the main issue, he hummed and hawed and beat around the bush as if he were afraid that Maigret would get the wrong idea about him.

'The ministry's archives were turned upside down and goodness knows there is plenty of paperwork there which no living person has any recollection of. Twice a day at least during that time I received a phone call from the president, and I am not sure he trusts me.

'We combed through the archives of the École des Ponts et Chaussées as well without any luck until yesterday morning.'

Maigret couldn't help asking, as at the end of a novel:

'And did you find the Calame Report?'

'Something that appears to be the Calame Report, in any case.'

'Where?'

'In an attic at the École.'

'A teacher?'

'A supervisor. Yesterday afternoon, I was given a note from a certain Piquemal, whom I had never heard of, on which was written in pencil: "In connection with the Calame Report". I sent for him straight away. I took the precaution of asking my secretary, Mademoiselle Blanche, to leave, even though she's been with me for twenty years, because she's from La Roche-sur-Yon and used to work in my legal practice. You'll understand why that means something. My principal private secretary wasn't in the room either. I was alone with a middle-aged man with a fixed gaze, who stood before me without saying a word, a package wrapped in grey paper under his arm.

' "Monsieur Piquemal?" I asked, slightly anxious because for a moment I thought I was dealing with a madman.

'He nodded.

' "Have a seat."

' "There's no point."

'I had the sense that there was no kindness in his eyes.

'He asked me, almost rudely:

' "Are you the minister?"

' "Yes."

‘ “I’m a supervisor at the École des Ponts et Chaussées.”

‘He took a couple of steps forwards and held out the package, saying in the same tone:

‘ “Open it and give me a receipt.”

‘The package contained a document of about forty pages, which was obviously a carbon copy: “Report on the Construction of a Sanatorium in the Village of Clairfond, Haute-Savoie”.

‘The document wasn’t signed, but Julien Calame’s name and position were typed on the last page, with the date.

‘Still standing, Piquemal repeated:

‘ “I want a receipt.”

‘I wrote him one by hand. He folded it and slipped it into a shabby wallet, and made for the door. I called him back.

‘ “Where did you find those papers?”

‘ “In the attic.”

‘ “You will probably be asked to make a written statement.”

‘ “You know where to find me.”

‘ “You haven’t shown this document to anyone?”

‘He looked me in the eyes with contempt:

‘ “No one.”

‘ “There weren’t any other copies?”

‘ “Not that I’m aware of.”

‘ “Thank you.” ’

Point looked at him, embarrassed.

‘That’s where I made a mistake,’ he went on. ‘I think it was because of the strangeness of this Piquemal, because I can picture an anarchist behaving in the same way when throwing a bomb.’

‘How old?’ asked Maigret.

‘Forty-five, perhaps. Neither well nor badly dressed. His stare is that of a madman or a fanatic.’

‘Did you check up on him?’

‘Not at the time. It was five p.m. There were still four or five people in my waiting room, and that evening I had to preside over an engineers’ dinner. Knowing that my visitor had left, my secretary came back and I slipped the Calame file into my personal briefcase.

‘I should have telephoned the president of the Council. If I didn’t, I swear to you, it was, once again, because I wondered whether Piquemal was mad. There was no proof that the document was genuine. Almost every day we receive visits from people who are mentally unbalanced.’

‘So do we.’

‘Then perhaps you’ll understand. My meetings went on until seven p.m. I just had the time to nip into my apartment and get changed for dinner.’

‘Did you mention the Calame Report to your wife?’

‘No. I took my briefcase with me. I told her that after the dinner I’d drop into Boulevard Pasteur. I do that quite often. Not only do we come here together on Sundays for a little dinner that she cooks for just the two of us, but also I come here on my own when I have important work to do and I need peace and quiet.’

‘Where was the dinner?’

‘At the Palais d’Orsay.’

‘Did you take the briefcase with you?’

‘I left it locked in the car in the care of my driver, whom I trust absolutely.’

‘Did you return here immediately afterwards?’

‘At around 10.30. Ministers are lucky enough not to have to stay after the speech.’

‘Were you in a dinner jacket?’

‘I took it off to sit down at my desk.’

‘Did you read the report?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did it seem authentic?’

The minister nodded.

‘Would it really be a bombshell if it were published?’

‘There’s no doubt.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Professor Calame virtually foresaw the disaster. Even though I’m in charge of public works, I’m not capable of explaining his reasoning, particularly the technical details he gives in support of his argument. The fact is that he took a clear, unquestionable stance against the project, and it was the duty of anyone having read the report to vote against the building of Clairfond as it was envisaged, or at least to demand an additional study. Do you understand?’

‘I’m beginning to.’

‘How *La Rumeur* found out about the document, I have no idea. Do they have a copy? I don’t know that either. As far as I am aware, the only person in possession of a copy of the Calame Report last night was myself.’

‘What happened?’

‘Around midnight, I telephoned the president of the Council, but I was told he was at a political meeting in Rouen. I nearly called him there …’

‘But you didn’t?’

‘No. Because I was worried about the phone being tapped. I felt as if I had a box of dynamite here capable not only of blowing up the government but of bringing a number of my colleagues into disrepute. It is impossible that those who read the report could have insisted on …’

Maigret thought he could guess the rest.

‘Did you leave the report in this apartment?’

‘Yes.’

‘In the study?’

‘It has a lock. I thought it was safer here than at the ministry, where too many people I barely know pass through.’

‘Was your driver waiting downstairs all the time you were reading the report?’

‘I’d sent him home. I took a taxi at the corner of the street.’

‘Did you talk to your wife when you got home?’

‘Not about the Calame Report. I didn’t breathe a word about it to anyone until the next day, at one p.m, when I met the president at the Chamber. I informed him in a window recess.’

‘Did he seem worried?’

‘I think he was. Any government leader would have been. He asked me to fetch the report and bring it to him in person to his office.’

‘And the report had gone from your study?’

‘Yes.’

‘Had the lock been forced?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Did you see the president again?’

‘No. I felt genuinely ill. I had a driver take me to Boulevard Saint-Germain and I postponed all my meetings. My wife telephoned the president and told him I was unwell, that I’d fainted, and that I’d go and see him tomorrow morning.’

‘Does your wife know?’

‘For the first time in my life I lied to her. I don’t know exactly what I told her, and I must have broken off several times.’

‘Does she know you’re here?’

‘She thinks I’m at a meeting. I wonder whether you understand my predicament. I find myself suddenly alone, with the feeling that the moment I open my mouth, everyone will attack me. No one will believe my story. I had the Calame Report in my hands. I am the only person, apart from Piquemal, to have held it. *Worse still, on at least three occasions in the past few years I’ve been the guest of Arthur Nicoud, of the engineering firm in question, at his estate in Samois.’*

He suddenly flagged. His shoulders became less broad, his chin dropped. He seemed to be saying: ‘Do what you like. I don’t know any more.’

Without asking permission, Maigret poured himself a brandy and only after raising it to his lips did it occur to him to refill the minister’s glass.

2. The Telephone Call from the President

He had probably experienced this feeling before during his career, but never as intensely, it seemed to him. The cramped room, its warmth, its snugness, all helped create this impression, along with the smell of fruit brandy, the desk that reminded him of his father's, the enlarged photos of the parents on the walls: Maigret really felt like a doctor called out in an emergency and in whose hands the patient has placed his fate.

The strangest thing was that the man opposite him, who looked as if he were waiting for his diagnosis, resembled him, if not like a brother, at least like a cousin. The likeness was not just physical. A glance at the family portraits told Maigret that he and Point had very similar backgrounds. They both came from provincial families of peasant stock who had gone up in the world. The minister's parents, like Maigret's, had probably had the ambition for their son to be a doctor or a lawyer from the minute he was born.

Point had surpassed their hopes. Were they still alive to know it?

He did not dare ask those questions right away. Before him was a man who had gone to pieces, and he could tell it was not out of weakness. Looking at him, Maigret felt a complex emotion, a mixture of disgust and anger, and also of despondency.

Once, he had found himself in a similar situation, although less dramatic, and that too had been linked to a political affair. He had been in no way to blame. He had acted exactly as he should have done, had behaved not only with integrity but in strict accordance with his duty as a public servant.

He had still been thought wrong in the eyes of all, or nearly all. He had had to face a disciplinary hearing and, since everything was against him, they had no option but to find him guilty.

It was at that time that he had briefly left the Police Judiciaire and been exiled for a year to the Flying Squad in Luçon, in Vendée, the region that Point represented in parliament.

As his wife and friends kept telling him, his conscience was clear, and yet, sometimes, without realizing it, he would behave as if guilty. During those final days at the Police Judiciaire, for example, while his case was being discussed in high places, he no longer dared give orders to his subordinates, not even to Lucas or Janvier, and, when he came down the main staircase, he skulked close to the walls.

Point was unable to think clearly about his own case. He had just said everything he had to say. In the past few hours, he had behaved like a drowning man whose only hope lay in a miraculous rescue.

Was it not strange that he had appealed to Maigret, whom he did not know and had never seen?

Instinctively, Maigret took him in hand, and his questions were like those of a doctor seeking to make his diagnosis.

'Did you check Piquemal's identity?'

'I had my secretary telephone the École des Ponts et Chaussées and they confirmed that Jules Piquemal has worked there as a supervisor for fifteen years.'

'Is it not strange that instead of handing the document to the dean he brought it to your office in person?'

'I don't know. That didn't occur to me.'

'That seems to suggest that he was aware of its importance, does it not?'

'I think so. Yes.'

'In short, since the discovery of the Calame Report, Piquemal and you are the only people who have had the chance to read it.'

'Apart from whoever has it in their hands right now.'

'Let's not worry about that for the moment. Unless I'm mistaken, only one person apart from Piquemal knew, from Tuesday at around one o'clock, that you were in possession of the document?'

'You mean the president of the Council?'

Point looked at Maigret, aghast. The present government leader, Oscar Malterre, was a man of sixty-five who had been a member of

nearly every cabinet since his forties. His father had been a prefect, one of his brothers was a deputy and another a colonial governor.

'I hope you're not implying …'

'I'm not implying anything, minister. I am trying to piece together the facts. The Calame Report was in this study yesterday evening. This afternoon, it was gone. Are you certain that the door of the apartment hadn't been forced?'

'You can see for yourself. There are no scratch marks on the wood or on the brass of the lock. Perhaps someone used a skeleton key?'

'What about the lock on your study?'

'Look. It's very easy. There have been times when I've forgotten my key and I've unlocked it with a piece of wire.'

'I will, if I may, carry on asking the routine police questions, if only to do the groundwork. Who, apart from you, has a key to the apartment?'

'My wife, of course.'

'You told me she knows nothing about the Calame affair.'

'I haven't mentioned it to her. She doesn't even know that I came here yesterday and today.'

'Does she take a close interest in politics?'

'She reads the newspapers, keeps herself sufficiently informed to be able to discuss my work with me. When I was invited to stand for election to parliament, she tried to dissuade me. She didn't want me to be a minister either. She's not ambitious.'

'Is she from La Roche-sur-Yon?'

'Her father was a lawyer there.'

'Let's go back to the keys. Who else has a set?'

'My secretary, Mademoiselle Blanche.'

'Blanche who?'

Maigret scribbled in his black notebook.

'Blanche Lamotte. She must be … wait … forty-one … no, forty-two.'

'Have you known her for a long time?'

'She started working for me as a typist when she was barely seventeen and had just finished at the Pigier secretarial college. She's been with me ever since.'

'And she is also from La Roche?'

'From a neighbouring village. Her father was a butcher.'

'Pretty?'

Point seemed to be thinking, as if he'd never asked himself the

question.

'No. You couldn't say she was pretty.'

'In love with you?'

Maigret smiled on seeing the minister blush.

'How do you know? Let's say she's in love in her own way. I don't think there's ever been a man in her life.'

'Jealous of your wife?'

'Not in the usual sense of the word. I suspect her of being jealous of what she considers to be her territory.'

'You mean that at the office, she's the one who looks after you.'

Point, even though he was a man of the world, looked surprised that Maigret had put his finger on such ordinary truths.

'She was in your office, you told me, when Piquemal was announced and you asked her to leave. When you called her back in, were you still holding the report?'

'I think so, yes … but I assure you …'

'Please understand, minister, that I am not accusing anyone, that I do not suspect anyone. Like you, I'm trying to get a clear picture. Are there any other keys to this apartment?'

'My daughter has one.'

'How old is she?'

'Anne-Marie? Twenty-four.'

'Married?'

'She's going – or rather was going – to be married next month. With this storm brewing, I don't know any more. Do you know the Courmont family?'

'By name.'

If the Malterres were renowned politicians, the Courmonts had been equally illustrious as diplomats for at least three generations. Robert Courmont, who had a mansion in Rue de la Faisanderie and was one of the last Frenchmen to wear a monocle, had been an ambassador for more than thirty years, in Tokyo and London, and was a member of the Institut de France.

'The son?'

'Alain Courmont, yes. At the age of thirty-two he's already served as attaché at three or four embassies and is now head of an important department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He's been appointed to Buenos Aires, where he must take up his post three weeks after his wedding. You see now that the situation is even more disastrous than it seems. A scandal like the one that awaits me

tomorrow or the day after …'

'Did your daughter often come here?'

'Not since we have officially lived at the ministry residence.'

'So she never has?'

'I prefer to tell you everything, inspector. Otherwise there would have been no point in asking you to come. Anne-Marie took her baccalaureate and then studied philosophy and arts. She's not a blue-stocking, but she's not a girl like the girls of today. Once, about a month ago, I found some cigarette ash here. Mademoiselle Blanche doesn't smoke. Neither does my wife. I asked Anne-Marie and she admitted that she sometimes came to the apartment with Alain. I didn't want to ask any more. I remember what she said, looking me straight in the eye without blushing:

' "You have to be realistic, Father. I'm twenty-four and he's thirty-two."

'Do you have children, Maigret?'

Maigret shook his head.

'I don't suppose there's any cigarette ash today?'

'No.'

Since he had had nothing to do but answer questions, Point was already less despondent, like a patient who answers a doctor knowing that the latter will eventually give him a remedy. Perhaps Maigret was dwelling on this business with the keys deliberately?

'There's no one else?'

'My principal private secretary.'

'Who's that?'

'Jacques Fleury.'

'Have you known him long?'

'I was at school and then at university with him.'

'Also from Vendée?'

'No. He's from Niort. Not so far away. Around my age.'

'Lawyer?'

'He was never called to the bar.'

'Why not?'

'He's a strange fellow. His parents had money. As a young man, he had no desire to work regularly. Every six months, he'd embrace some new fad. He once took it into his head to supply fishing vessels, and he owned several boats. He also got involved with a colonial company that went under. I lost track of him. After I was elected deputy, I would run into him from time to time in Paris.'

‘Ruined?’

‘Completely. But he always looked dapper. He’s never stopped looking dapper, or being infinitely agreeable. He’s the incarnation of the charming failure.’

‘Did he ask you for favours?’

‘Yes and no. It’s of no importance. Shortly before becoming a minister, chance had it that I bumped into him more frequently, and when I needed a principal private secretary, he happened to be on hand and available.’

Point knitted his bushy eyebrows.

‘On that matter, I have to explain something to you. You probably don’t realize what it means to become a minister overnight. Look at me. I’m a lawyer, just a provincial lawyer, it’s true, but still I do know about the law. However, I’m put in charge of public works. With no training, I am suddenly at the head of a ministry teeming with competent senior civil servants and people as distinguished as the late Calame. I did as everyone else did. I put on a confident air and acted as if I knew everything. Even so, I sensed mockery and hostility around me. I was also aware of a host of intrigues about which I was clueless.

‘It’s the same within the ministry. I’m still an outsider because there too I find myself among people in the know about all that goes on behind the scenes in politics.

‘Having a man like Fleury by my side, in front of whom I can open up …’

‘I understand. When you appointed him as your principal private secretary, did Fleury already have political connections?’

‘Only vague contacts made in bars and restaurants.’

‘Married?’

‘He was. He must still be, because I don’t think he got divorced, and he had two children by his wife. They don’t live together. He has at least one other household in Paris, possibly two, because he has a talent for complicating his life.’

‘Are you certain he was unaware that you had the Calame Report in your possession?’

‘He didn’t even see Piquemal at the ministry. I didn’t mention anything to him.’

‘How are relations between Fleury and Mademoiselle Blanche?’

‘Outwardly cordial. Deep down, Mademoiselle Blanche can’t stand him because she’s bourgeois through and through and

Fleury's love life offends and exasperates her. You see, this is getting us nowhere.'

'Are you certain your wife has no idea you are here?'

'She commented this evening that I seemed worried. She wanted me to take advantage of the fact that for once I didn't have an important engagement and go to bed. I said I had a meeting.'

'Did she believe you?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you in the habit of lying to her?'

'No.'

It was almost midnight. This time it was the minister who refilled their little tumblers and went over with a sigh to the rack to choose a curved pipe with a silver ring.

As if to confirm Maigret's intuition, the telephone rang. Point looked at him as if to ask whether he should answer it.

'It's probably your wife. When you go home, you'll have to tell her everything.'

The minister picked up the receiver.

'Hello! Yes … It's me …'

He already sounded guilty.

'No … There's someone with me … We had to discuss a very important matter … I'll tell you about it later … I don't know … I won't be much longer … Fine … I assure you I feel fine … What? … From the president's office? … He wants …? Right … I'll see … Yes … I'll do so right away … See you later …'

Beads of sweat on his forehead, again he looked at Maigret like a man at his wits' end.

'The president's office called three times … The president sent a message that I should telephone him no matter how late …'

He mopped his brow. He had forgotten to light his pipe.

'What do I do?'

'Call him, I suppose. Tomorrow morning you're going to have to tell him that you no longer have the report. There's no chance we'll be able to lay our hands on it overnight.'

There was something comical about Point's helplessness, which showed both his consternation and the instinctive trust that some people have in the power of the police. He said, almost mechanically:

'You think not?'

Then, sitting down heavily, he dialled a number he knew by

heart.

'Hello! The minister of public works here … I'd like to speak to the president … My apologies, madame … This is Point speaking … I think your husband is expecting … Yes … I'll hold on …'

He drained his glass in one go, his gaze fixed on one of the buttons on Maigret's jacket.

'Yes, sir … I apologize for not having called you earlier … I'm better, yes … It was nothing … Fatigue, probably, yes … And also … I was going to tell you …'

Maigret heard a booming voice that did not sound reassuring. Point was like a child being scolded who is trying to excuse himself to no avail.

'Yes … I know … Believe me …'

At last he was allowed to speak, and he stumbled over his words.

'You see, the most … the most dreadful thing has happened … Sorry? … It's about the report, yes … I brought it to my private apartment yesterday … Boulevard Pasteur, yes …'

If only he could tell the story his way! But the president kept interrupting him, and he became confused.

'Yes of course … I'm in the habit of working here when … What? … I'm here at the moment, yes … No, my secretary didn't know, otherwise she would have given me your message … No! I don't have the Calame Report any more … That is what I have been trying to tell you from the start … I left it here in the belief that it would be safer than at the ministry and, when I came back to pick it up, this afternoon, after our conversation …'

Maigret looked away on seeing a tear of frustration or humiliation well up under his large eyelids.

'I spent a long time looking … No! Of course I haven't …'

Covering the mouthpiece with his hand, he whispered to Maigret:

'He's asking if I've informed the police …'

Now he listened, muttering occasionally:

'Yes … yes … I understand …'

His face was streaming and Maigret was tempted to go and open the window.

'I assure you, sir …'

The ceiling light was not on. The two men and the corner of the study were lit only by a lamp with a green shade which left the rest of the room in darkness. From time to time, a taxi could be heard tooting its horn in the fog on Boulevard Pasteur and, very

occasionally, the whistle of a train resounded.

The photograph of the father on the wall portrayed a man of around sixty-five and must have been taken around ten years earlier, judging by Point's age. The photograph of the mother, on the other hand, showed a woman of barely thirty, in a dress and with a hairstyle from the turn of the century, and Maigret deduced that Madame Point, like his own mother, had died when her son was still very young.

There were possibilities he hadn't yet mentioned to the minister and which he was subconsciously beginning to play out in his mind. Because of the telephone call he had overheard, he thought of Malterre, the president of the Council, who was also minister of the interior and who, consequently, had the supreme authority over the Sûreté Nationale.

Supposing Malterre had got wind of Piquemal's visit to Boulevard Saint-Germain and put Auguste Point under surveillance … or even that after the conversation he was having with him …

Anything was possible – Point could have wanted to hold on to the document in order to destroy it, or keep it as a trump card.

The tabloid term happened in this case to be exact: the Calame Report was a real bombshell, which gave whoever had it in their possession boundless opportunities.

'Yes, sir … Not the police, I repeat …'

The president must have been harassing him with questions that threw him off balance. His eyes were imploring Maigret for help, but there was nothing he could do. Point was already wavering.

'The person who is in my study is not here on official business …'

Yet he was a strong man, both physically and mentally. Maigret also considered himself to be strong, and yet, in the past, he too had wavered when he had been caught up in a chain of events, albeit less dramatic ones. What had crushed him the most, he remembered and would do for the rest of his life, was the feeling of being confronted with a nameless, faceless power, impossible to pin down, and also the fact that that power was the Force – with a capital 'F' – of the Law.

Point caved in.

'It's Detective Chief Inspector Maigret. I asked him to come and see me in a private capacity … I am sure that he …'

The president interrupted him. The receiver shook.

'No leads, no … Nobody … No, my wife doesn't know either …

Nor does my secretary … I swear …'

Becoming humble, he forgot his habitual 'sir'.

'Yes … Nine o'clock … I promise … Do you wish to speak to him? One moment …'

He looked at Maigret sheepishly.

'The president wishes …'

Maigret grabbed the phone.

'Maigret here, sir.'

'I understand that my colleague from public works has informed you of the incident?'

'Yes, sir.'

'No need to repeat that this business must remain strictly confidential. So it is not a matter of carrying out a routine investigation. The Sûreté Nationale won't be brought in either.'

'I understand, sir.'

'It goes without saying that if, in a private capacity, without acting officially, without appearing to be involved, you were to discover anything related to the Calame Report, you would let me …'

He corrected himself. He did not want to be personally mixed up with the case.

'… you would inform my colleague Point.'

'Yes, sir.'

'That is all.'

Maigret wanted to hand the receiver back to the minister, but the president had hung up.

'I'm sorry, Maigret. He pushed me into naming you. He's said to have been a famous criminal lawyer before going into politics, and I have no trouble believing it. I apologize for having put you in a delicate—'

'You're seeing him tomorrow morning?'

'At nine. He doesn't want the other members of the cabinet to know about this. The thing he's most worried about is that Piquemal will talk, or already has done, because he is the only person, other than the three of us, who knows that the document has surfaced.'

'I'll try to find out what kind of man he is.'

'You won't give yourself away, will you?'

'I must simply warn you, in all honesty, that I have to inform my chief. I don't need to go into detail, i.e. mention the Calame Report.

All the same, he must be told that I am working for you. If it were only up to me, I could handle the case in my own time, but I'll probably need the help of some of my squad …'

'Will they know?'

'They won't know anything of the report, I promise you.'

'I was on the verge of offering him my resignation, but he pre-empted me by saying that he didn't even have the option of firing me from the cabinet because even if the truth didn't come out, doing that would arouse the suspicions of those who have been following the latest political developments. Now I'm the black sheep and my colleagues—'

'Are you certain that the report you had in your hands was a genuine copy of the Calame Report?'

Point looked up, surprised.

'Do you think it might have been a forgery?'

'I don't think anything. I am exploring every theory. By presenting you with a Calame Report, genuine or fake, and then making it disappear, someone has automatically discredited you and the entire government, because you'll be accused of having suppressed it.'

'In that case, it will be in the news tomorrow.'

'Not necessarily so fast. I'd like to know where, and in what circumstances, the report was discovered.'

'Do you think you can find out without attracting attention?'

'I'll try. I assume that you have told me everything, minister? I am taking the liberty of pressing you because, under the circumstances, it is important that—'

'I know. One small detail that I haven't mentioned so far. At the beginning, I named Arthur Nicoud. When I met him at some dinner or other, I was an ordinary deputy and it didn't occur to me that one day I'd be in charge of public works. I knew he belonged to the firm Nicoud & Sauvegrain, the contractors based in Avenue de la République.

'Arthur Nicoud didn't behave like a business tycoon but like a man of the world. Contrary to what people might think, he's not the nouveau riche type, nor even a speculator. He is cultured. He has a good life. In Paris, he frequents the best restaurants, always in the company of pretty women, particularly actresses and film stars.

'I think that anyone who's anyone in the world of literature, the arts and politics has been invited at least once to his Sunday

lunches in Samois.

'I've met a good number of my fellow politicians there, newspaper editors and scientists, people whose integrity I'm prepared to vouch for.

'Nicoud himself, in his country house, gives the impression of a man for whom nothing matters as much as serving his guests the finest and most exquisite foods in sophisticated surroundings.

'My wife has never liked him.

'We have been there about half a dozen times, perhaps, never on our own, never on an intimate footing. Some Sundays, there were as many as thirty people for lunch, seated at small tables and then gathering in the library or around the swimming pool.

'What I didn't tell you is that one time, two years ago I believe, yes, two years ago at Christmas, my daughter received a tiny gold fountain pen engraved with her initials, with Arthur Nicoud's business card.

'I nearly made her send the gift back. I don't recall who I mentioned it to – one of my colleagues – and I was pretty annoyed. He told me that Nicoud's gesture meant nothing, that it was his habit, every Christmas, to send a memento to his guests' wives or daughters. That year it was fountain pens, of which he must have ordered dozens. Another year it had been powder compacts, gold again, because apparently he loves gold.

'My daughter kept the pen. I think she still uses it.

'And tomorrow, when the Calame Report story hits the headlines, they'll say that Auguste Point's daughter received and accepted …'

Maigret nodded. He did not underestimate the importance of a detail like that.

'Nothing else? He hasn't lent you any money?'

Point blushed to the roots of his hair. Maigret understood why. It wasn't because he had anything to reproach himself for, but because now everyone would be entitled to ask him that question.

'Never! I swear—'

'I believe you. You don't have any shares in Nicoud & Sauvegrain?'

Point said no, with a rueful smile.

'Starting in the morning, I'm going to do my utmost,' promised Maigret. 'You realize that I know less than you about this and that I am utterly unfamiliar with political circles. As I have said, I very much doubt we'll be able to find the report before the person who

has it in their hands makes use of it.

'Might you yourself have got rid of the report to protect your colleagues who are compromised by it?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Even if your party leader had asked you to?'

'Even if the president of the Council had suggested it.'

'I thought as much. Forgive me for having asked the question. Now, minister, I shall leave you.'

The two men rose and Point held out his large, hairy hand.

'I am so sorry to drag you into all this. I was so dispirited, bewildered …'

Entrusting his fate to another had made him feel relieved. He spoke in his normal voice, switched on the ceiling light and opened the door.

'You can't come and see me at the ministry without arousing curiosity, because you're too well known. Nor can you telephone me, in case the phone is being tapped. As I said, everyone knows about this apartment. How can we communicate?'

'I'll find a way of contacting you when I need to. You can always telephone me at home in the evenings from a public booth, as you did today, and, if I'm not there, leave a message with my wife.'

The same idea had occurred to both men at the same time, and they couldn't help smiling. Standing there by the door, they were like a pair of conspirators.

'Good night, minister.'

'Thank you, Maigret. Good night.'

Maigret did not bother to call the lift. He walked down the four flights of stairs, asked the concierge to open the door and found himself outside in the fog, which had become denser and colder. To have some chance of finding a taxi, he had to walk to Boulevard Montparnasse, pipe between his teeth and his hands in his pockets. After he had gone around twenty metres, two large headlamps lit up in front of him as a car engine started up.

The fog made it hard to judge distances. For a moment, Maigret had the impression that the car, which had started moving, was driving straight at him, but it simply cruised past him after enveloping him for a few seconds in a hazy light.

He hadn't had time to raise his hand to hide his face. He also had the notion that it would have been pointless.

It was highly likely that someone wanted to know who, that

night, had paid a lengthy visit to the minister's apartment, whose fourth-floor windows were lit.

Maigret shrugged and continued on his way, meeting only a couple walking slowly, arm in arm, lips glued together, who almost bumped into him.

Eventually he found a taxi. The light was still on in his apartment on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. He took out his key, as always. And, as always, his wife opened the door before he had found the lock. She was in her nightdress, barefoot, her eyes puffy with sleep, and she immediately went back to the hollow she had made in the bed.

'What time is it?' she asked in a faraway voice.

'Ten past one.'

He smiled at the thought that in another apartment, more luxurious but anonymous, another couple was experiencing almost the same thing.

Point and his wife were not at home. It was not their bedroom or their bed. They were strangers in their vast official residence, which must have felt as if it were full of traps.

'What did he want from you?'

'To be honest, I'm not entirely sure.'

She was still half-asleep and she forced herself to wake up fully while he undressed.

'You don't know why he wanted to see you?'

'Just to ask for my advice.'

He didn't want to say for reassurance, which would have been more accurate. It was funny. He had the feeling that if he had uttered the words 'Calame Report' in the familiar, almost tangible intimacy of his apartment, he would have burst out laughing.

In Point's apartment on Boulevard Pasteur, half an hour earlier, those words had had a dramatic ring. A desperate minister had spoken them with a sort of terror. A president of the National Assembly was moved to speak as if it were an affair of state of the utmost importance.

The entire drama was about some thirty sheets of paper that had been gathering dust for years in an attic or elsewhere without anyone being concerned about the report's whereabouts and which a school supervisor had unearthed, perhaps by chance.

'What are you thinking about?'

'Someone called Piquemal.'

'Who is he?'

‘I don’t know exactly.’

It was true he was thinking about Piquemal, or rather that he was repeating the three syllables of his name, finding them amusing.

‘Sleep well.’

‘You too. By the way, wake me up at seven tomorrow.’

‘Why so early?’

‘I have to make a telephone call.’

Madame Maigret had already reached out to turn off the light, the switch being on her side of the bed.

3. The Stranger in the Little Bar

A hand tapped him on the shoulder and a voice whispered in his ear:

'Maigret! It's seven o'clock.'

The smell of coffee from the cup his wife was holding tickled his nostrils. His senses and his brain started up rather like an orchestra when the musicians in the pit start tuning their instruments. There was no coordination yet. Seven o'clock – so today was different because he usually woke at eight. Without opening his eyes, he was aware that the sun was shining, whereas the previous day had been misty. Before the thought of fog reminded him of Boulevard Pasteur, he had an unpleasant taste in his mouth which he had not experienced on waking for a long time. He wondered if he was going to have a hangover as he recalled the little tumblers and the minister's home-made brandy.

Irritably, he opened his eyes and sat up in bed, relieved to note that he didn't have a headache. He hadn't realized the night before that they had both emptied their glasses several times.

'Tired?' asked his wife.

'No. I'm fine.'

Puffy-eyed, he sipped his coffee, looking about him and muttering sleepily:

'It's a nice day.'

'Yes. There's a frost.'

The sun had the sharpness and coolness of a local white wine. Paris street life was stirring on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, with all

the familiar sounds.

'Do you have to go out so early?'

'No. I just have to telephone Chabot and am unlikely to find him at home after eight o'clock. If it's market day in Fontenay-le-Comte, he will even have left by seven thirty.'

Julien Chabot, now an investigating magistrate in Fontenay-le-Comte, where he lived with his mother in the large house where he was born, was a friend from his student days in Nantes. Maigret had dropped in to see him two years earlier on his way back from a congress in Bordeaux. The elderly Madame Chabot attended the first mass, at six o'clock in the morning, and by seven the household was already bustling; at eight o'clock, Julien left, not to go to the law courts, where he was hardly overburdened with work, but to stroll through the town's streets or along the banks of the Vendée.

'Give me another cup, would you?'

He drew the telephone towards him and asked for a connection. When the operator repeated the number, it suddenly dawned on him that if one of his theories of the previous night was true, his phone was already being tapped. That made him grumpy. He suddenly experienced the nausea he had felt when, against his will, he himself had been embroiled in a political intrigue. This made him resentful of Auguste Point, whom he'd never come across until the the previous night, and who'd had the bright idea of calling on him to get him out of a predicament …

'Madame Chabot? … Hello! … Is that Madame Chabot speaking? … Maigret here … No! Maigret …'

She was hard of hearing. He had to repeat his name five or six times and add:

'Jules Maigret, who's in the police …'

Then she exclaimed:

'Are you in Fontenay?'

'No. I'm calling from Paris. Is your son there?'

She shouted too loud, too close to the mouthpiece. He couldn't decipher what she was saying. A minute went by before he heard the voice of his friend Chabot.

'Julien?'

'Yes.'

'Can you hear me?'

'As clearly as if you were phoning from the station. How are you?'

‘Fine. Listen. I’m calling to ask you for some information. Were you in the middle of breakfast?’

‘Yes. It doesn’t matter.’

‘Have you come across Auguste Point?’

‘The minister?’

‘Yes.’

‘I often used to meet him when he was a lawyer in La Roche-sur-Yon.’

‘What do you think of him?’

‘He’s a remarkable man.’

‘Give me details. Everything that comes to mind.’

‘His father, Évariste Point, runs a hotel in Sainte-Hermine, in the town of Clemenceau, which is famous not for its rooms but for its excellent cuisine. Food lovers come from far and wide to eat there. He must be in his eighties. A few years ago, he handed the business over to his son-in-law and his daughter, but he is still involved. Auguste Point, his only son, was a student at about the same time as us, but in Poitiers, then Paris. Are you still there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Shall I go on? He was a bookworm, a swot. He opened a law firm on Place de la Préfecture, in La Roche-sur-Yon. You know the town. He stayed there for years, dealing chiefly with disputes between farmers and landowners. He married the daughter of a lawyer, Arthur Belion, who died two or three years ago and whose widow still lives in La Roche-sur-Yon.

‘I imagine that had it not been for the war, Auguste Point would have carried on quietly handling cases in Vendée and Poitiers.

‘During the Occupation, he kept a low profile, carrying on his day-to-day life as usual. Everyone was surprised when, a few weeks before the Germans retreated, they arrested him and took him to Niort, then somewhere in Alsace. They rounded up three or four others at the same time, including a surgeon from Bressuire, and that was how we learned that throughout the war, on a farm he owns near La Roche-sur-Yon, Point had sheltered British agents and aviators who’d escaped from the German camps.

‘We saw him come back, thin and in bad shape, a few days after the Liberation. He didn’t seek glory, didn’t get himself on to any committees or take part in any parades.

‘You remember the chaos there was at the time. Politics was confusing. No one knew who was good and who was bad.

‘People ended up turning to him when they weren’t sure of anything any more.

‘He did a good job, always quietly, without allowing his head to be turned, and we sent him to Paris as an elected deputy.

‘That’s pretty much his entire story. The Points have kept their house in Place de la Préfecture. They live in Paris when the Chamber is in session and come back immediately afterwards, and Point still has some of his clients.

‘I think his wife helps him a great deal. They have a daughter.’

‘I know.’

‘Then you know as much as I do.’

‘Are you acquainted with his secretary?’

‘Mademoiselle Blanche? I’ve often seen her in his office. We call her “the dragon”, because of the way she fiercely protects her boss.’

‘Nothing else to say about her?’

‘I suppose she’s in love with him, like the typical spinster.’

‘She worked for him before ending up a spinster.’

‘I know. But that’s another matter, and I can’t comment on that. What’s going on?’

‘Nothing yet. Have you come across a certain Jacques Fleury?’

‘A couple of times, at least twenty years ago. He must live in Paris. I have no idea what he does.’

‘Thank you, and I apologize again for disturbing your breakfast.’

‘My mother’s keeping it warm.’

At a loss for anything else to say, Maigret added:

‘Is it a nice day in Fontenay?’

‘It’s sunny, but the roofs are white with frost.’

‘It’s cold here too. Speak soon, old friend. Give my regards to your mother.’

‘Goodbye, Jules.’

For Julien Chabot, this telephone call was an event and he would mull it over as he strolled through the town’s streets, puzzled as to why Maigret was concerning himself with the doings of the minister of public works.

Maigret had breakfast too, still with an aftertaste of alcohol in his mouth, and when he went out he decided to go on foot, stopping at a café on Place de la République to settle his stomach with a glass of white wine.

Contrary to his habit, he bought all the morning papers, arriving at Quai des Orfèvres just in time for the briefing.

While his colleagues were gathered in the chief's office, he said nothing. He was barely listening but gazing vaguely out at the Seine and the pedestrians on the Pont Saint-Michel. He stayed behind. The chief knew what that meant.

'What is it, Maigret?'

'A headache!' he replied at first.

'In the department?'

'No. Paris has never been as calm as during the past five days. Only, last night, I received a personal telephone call from a minister who asked me to handle a case that I don't like. I had no option but to accept. I told him I'd speak to you about it, but without giving you the details.'

The head of the Police Judiciaire frowned.

'A very bothersome case?'

'Very.'

'In connection with the Clairfond fiasco?'

'Yes.'

'Is a minister asking you to carry out an investigation for him personally?'

'The president of the Council is aware of it.'

'I don't want to know any more. Go ahead, my friend, seeing as you have no option. Be careful.'

'I'll try.'

'Do you need men?'

'Three or four, probably. They won't be told what it's about exactly.'

'Why didn't they call in the Sûreté Nationale?'

'Don't you understand?'

'Of course I do. That's why I'm worried for you. Anyway …'

On the way back to his office Maigret opened the door to the inspectors' office.

'Could you come here for a moment, Janvier?'

Then, seeing Lapointe about to go out:

'Are you doing something important?'

'No, chief. Just routine.'

'Ask someone else to do it and wait for me. You too, Lucas.'

Once back in his office with Janvier, he shut the door.

'I'm going to give you a task, my friend. You won't have to write a report or liaise with anyone other than me. If you're careless, you could pay a high price.'

Janvier smiled, glad to be given a delicate mission.

'The minister of public works has a secretary called Blanche Lamotte who's around forty-three years old.'

He had taken his black notebook out of his pocket.

'I don't know where she lives or what her working hours are. I need to know about her doings, the kind of life she leads outside the ministry, and the people she mixes with. Neither she nor anyone else must know that the Police Judiciaire is taking an interest in her. Perhaps, if you watch the staff exit at midday, you might learn where she has lunch. Find a way. If she notices that you're looking at her, pretend you're smitten if you have to.'

Janvier, who was married and had just had his fourth child, pulled a face.

'Understood, chief. I'll do my best. Is there anything specific you want me to find out?'

'No. Bring me anything you discover and I'll see whether it's useful or not.'

'Urgent?'

'Very. Don't say a word to anyone, not even to Lapointe or Lucas. Understood?'

He opened the communicating door again.

'Lapointe! Come here.'

Young Lapointe, as everyone called him because he was the newest recruit to the department and he looked more like a student than a police officer, had already grasped that this was a confidential mission and felt honoured.

'Do you know the École des Ponts et Chaussées?'

'Rue des Saints-Pères, yes. For years I ate in a little restaurant almost opposite.'

'Good. There's a supervisor there called Piquemal. His first name is Jules, like mine. I don't know if he has rooms on the premises or not. I know nothing about him and I need as much information as possible.'

He repeated more or less the same thing he had said to Janvier.

'I don't know why, but from the description I've been given I get the feeling he's a bachelor. Perhaps he lives in furnished rooms? In which case, rent a room in the same hotel and pretend you're a student.'

Finally, it was Lucas' turn, with a similar brief, except that he was tasked with finding out about Jacques Fleury, the minister's

principal private secretary.

Those three rarely had their photographs in the newspapers. The general public didn't know them. Or rather, they had only heard Lucas' name.

Of course, if the Sûreté Nationale were on the case, the police officers would be recognized immediately, but that was inevitable. What was more, if they were, as Maigret had suspected earlier, his telephone calls, both at home and at Quai des Orfèvres, were already being tapped by Rue des Saussaies.

The previous night, someone had deliberately shone a bright light on him in the fog and, if that someone knew about Auguste Point's hideaway, they knew he had been there that evening and had received a visitor, and had most likely been able to identify Maigret at first glance.

Once alone in his office, he went over and opened the window, as if being in charge of this case made him gasp for a breath of fresh air. The newspapers were on his desk. He nearly looked at them but decided instead to deal with routine chores, sign reports and summons, and felt almost fond of the petty thieves, maniacs, swindlers and offenders of all kinds that he usually had to deal with.

He made some phone calls and went back to the inspectors' office to hand out instructions that had nothing to do with Point or with the wretched Calame Report.

By now, Auguste Point must already have seen the president. Had he told his wife everything beforehand, as Maigret had advised him to do?

It was colder than he had thought and he had to close the window. He sat in his chair and finally opened the newspaper that lay on top of the pile.

They were all still full of the Clairfond tragedy, and all, whatever their stance, were obliged to clamour for an inquiry because of public opinion.

Most of them chiefly attacked Arthur Nicoud. One article had the headline:

The Nicoud-Sauvegrain Monopoly

It listed the public works projects contracted by the government and some local authorities in the past few years to the company based in Avenue de la République. On the opposite page was a

column showing the cost of those works, which totalled several billion.

The concluding paragraph read:

It would be interesting to draw up the list of politicians, ministers, deputies, senators and municipal councillors of Paris and elsewhere who have been invited by Arthur Nicoud to his sumptuous estate in Samois.

A close look at Monsieur Nicoud's cheque stubs might also be revealing.

Only one newspaper, *Le Globe*, of which the deputy Mascoulin was, if not the owner, at least the driving force, had a banner headline reminiscent of Zola's famous open letter 'J'accuse':

Is it true that …?

This was followed by a series of questions, in larger type than usual, with a frame that drew even more attention to the piece:

Is it true that the idea for the Clairfond sanatorium was the brainchild not of legislators concerned about children's health but of a concrete merchant?

Is it true that this idea, mooted five years ago, was espoused by several leading figures during the course of sumptuous lunches given by this concrete merchant at his Samois estate?

Is it true that not only did the guests partake of excellent food and wine, but they frequently emerged from the magnate's private study with a cheque in their pocket?

Is it true that, when the project took shape, all those who were acquainted with the site selected for the wonderful sanatorium were aware of the lunacy and riskiness of the enterprise?

Is it true that the parliamentary committee responsible for making recommendations to parliament and chaired by the brother of the current president of the Council had to call on the wisdom of an expert whose reputation is undisputed?

Is it true that this expert, Julien Calame, professor of applied mechanics and civil engineering at the École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, spent three weeks on site with the drawings …

… that on his return, he delivered to those concerned a report whose contents were catastrophic for the backers of the project …

… but that the government still voted to finance it, and that the construction of Clairfond began a few weeks later?

Is it true that until his death two years ago, Julien Calame, in the view of all those who came into contact with him, gave the impression of a man who had something weighing on his conscience?

Is it true that, in his report, he predicted the Clairfond fiasco almost exactly as it occurred?

Is it true that the Calame Report, of which there must have been several copies, has disappeared from the parliamentary archives, and from those

of the various ministries involved?

Is it true that since the tragedy, some thirty consular officials at least have been living in dread of a copy of this report turning up?

Is it true that, despite the precautions taken, a copy did emerge very recently …

… and that the miraculously salvaged copy was handed over to the appropriate authority?

There was a headline splashed across the page:

We Want to Know

The article read:

Is the Calame Report still in the hands of the person it was given to?

Has it been destroyed so as to shield the gang of politicians compromised by it?

If it hasn't, where is it at the time of writing and why has it not been published yet, when public opinion rightly demands the punishment of the real culprits of a disaster that cost the lives of 128 French children?

Finally, at the bottom of the page, and in the same typeface as the two previous headlines:

Where is the Calame Report?

Maigret caught himself mopping his brow. It wasn't hard to imagine how Auguste Point would react on reading this article.

Le Globe did not enjoy a wide circulation. It was a biased paper; it wasn't the organ of any of the major parties but represented a small faction headed by Joseph Mascoulin.

The other newspapers still intended to launch their own investigations, in order to uncover the truth.

And Maigret also wanted to uncover this truth, as long as it emerged in its entirety.

But he had the impression that people weren't genuinely seeking the truth. If Mascoulin, for example, was the man who now had the report in his hands, why, instead of asking questions, did he not publish it in print as big as his article?

He would have caused an immediate ministerial crisis, a radical purge of the parliamentary ranks, and would have been seen by the public as the defender of the people's interests and political integrity.

For him, a man who had always worked behind the scenes, it was a unique opportunity to make headline news and probably play a prestigious part in the years to come.

So, if he was in possession of the document, why did he not publish it?

It was Maigret's turn to ask questions, as in the article.

If Mascoulin didn't have it, how did he know the report had come to light?

How had he found out that Piquemal had handed it to an official figure?

And how could he suspect that Point had not in turn handed it over to the highest authorities?

Maigret was not, and did not want to be, au fait with the secret world of politics. Besides, he did not need to know a great deal about the machinations cooked up behind the scenes to note that:

1. It was in a disreputable if not blackmailing newspaper, *La Rumeur*, belonging to Hector Tabard, that the Calame Report had been mentioned three times since the Clairfond disaster.
2. The discovery of this report had come on the heels of these articles in rather strange circumstances.
3. Piquemal, a lowly supervisor at the École des Ponts et Chaussées, had gone directly to the minister's office instead of going through his superiors, in this case the dean.
4. Joseph Mascoulin knew about his handing over of the report.
5. He seemed to know about the report's disappearance.

Were Mascoulin and Tabard playing the same game? Were they in league or acting separately?

Maigret went to open the window again and stood for a long time watching the quays of the Seine, puffing on his pipe. He had never handled such a muddled case, with so little evidence to go on.

When it was a burglary or a murder, he was immediately on familiar ground. But here, on the contrary, the case involved individuals whose names he knew only vaguely from reading about them in the press.

He knew, for example, that Mascoulin had lunch every day at the same table in a restaurant on Place des Victoires, the Filet de Sole, where a constant stream of people came to shake hands with him or

give him a whispered snippet of news.

Mascoulin claimed to know about the private lives of all the politicians. His own name rarely appeared in the newspapers except on the eve of an important vote. Then you would read:

> *Deputy Mascoulin forecasts that the draft resolution will be adopted by 342 votes.*

Those in the business took such predictions as gospel, because Mascoulin was rarely wrong, and even then, he would only be out by two or three votes.

He was not a member of any special commission, did not chair any committee, and yet he was more feared than the leader of a major party.

Around midday, Maigret felt like going to the Filet de Sole to have lunch, if only to observe more closely the man he had only glimpsed at official ceremonies.

Mascoulin was unmarried, even though he was over forty. He was not known to have had any mistresses, and was not to be found in society salons, or at the theatre or cabaret.

He had a long, bony face and by lunchtime his cheeks were covered in stubble. He dressed badly, or rather was not concerned about his clothes, which were never laundered and made him look somewhat scruffy.

Why did Maigret say to himself that, from Point's description of Piquemal, this must be a man of the same ilk?

He was suspicious of loners, people who do not have an avowed passion.

In the end, he decided not to go and have lunch at the Filet de Sole, because that would have amounted to a declaration of war, but headed for the Brasserie Dauphine instead. There he found two colleagues with whom he could talk about something other than the Calame Report for an hour.

One of the afternoon newspapers partially echoed the *Globe*'s theme, much more cautiously, in veiled language, simply asking what the truth was about the Calame Report. A journalist had tried to interview the president of the Council about the matter but had not been allowed to speak to him.

There was no mention of Point, because in actual fact the construction of the sanatorium came under the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Health.

At three o'clock, there was a knock on Maigret's door, which opened the moment he grunted a reply. It was Lapointe, a worried expression on his face.

'Have you got any news?'

'Nothing definite, chief. So far, it could still be a coincidence.'

'Tell me in detail.'

'I did my best to carry out your instructions. Tell me if I made any mistakes. First of all, I telephoned the École des Ponts et Chaussées saying I was a cousin of Piquemal's, that I'd just arrived in Paris and would like to see him but I didn't have his address.'

'Did they give it to you?'

'Without a moment's hesitation. He lives at the Hôtel du Berry in Rue Jacob. It's a modest furnished lodging house with only around thirty rooms and the owner's wife does some of the cleaning herself, while the owner does the admin. I went home to pick up a suitcase and then went to Rue Jacob looking like a student, as you suggested. I was lucky that there was a vacant room and I rented it for a week. It was almost half past ten when I came back down and I popped into the office to chat with the owner.'

'Did you mention Piquemal?'

'Yes. I told him I'd met him on holiday and I thought I recalled that this was where he lived.'

'What did he tell you?'

'That he'd gone out. He leaves the hotel every morning at eight o'clock and goes to a little café on the corner of the street where he has his coffee and croissants. He must be at work by half past eight.'

'Does he return to his lodgings during the day?'

'No. He comes back regularly at around half past seven and retires to his room. He only goes out on one or two evenings during the week. Apparently, he's as regular as clockwork – he doesn't have visitors, doesn't see any women, doesn't smoke, doesn't drink, but spends his evenings and sometimes part of the night reading.'

Maigret could tell that Lapointe had more up his sleeve and waited patiently.

'Maybe I shouldn't have, but I thought I was doing the right thing. When I found out that his room was on the same floor as mine and I knew which number it was, I thought you'd want to know what was in it. During the day, the hotel is virtually empty. There was only someone on the third floor playing the saxophone, probably a musician practising, and I could hear the maid on the

floor above mine. I tried my key on the off-chance. They're simple keys, an old type. It didn't work straight away, but by jiggling it, I managed to unlock the door.'

'I hope Piquemal wasn't in?'

'No. If they look for my fingerprints, they'll find them all over the place, because I didn't have any gloves. I opened the drawers and the cupboard as well as an unlocked suitcase in a corner. Piquemal has just one spare suit, dark grey, and a pair of black shoes. There are teeth missing from his comb. His toothbrush is the worse for wear. He doesn't use shaving cream, but he does use a shaving brush. The hotel owner was quite right when he said that he spends his evenings reading. There are books everywhere, mainly philosophy, political economics and history. Most were bought second-hand from the *bouquinistes* by the Seine. Three or four had public-library stamps. I copied down some of the authors' names: Engels, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, St Augustine, Karl Marx, Antonin Sertillanges, Saint-Simon … Do they mean anything to you?'

'Yes. Go on.'

'A cardboard box in one of the drawers contains old and recent membership cards, some of them going back twenty years, others only three. The oldest is for the Croix-de-Feu. There's another, dated 1937, a membership of Action Française. Immediately after the war, Piquemal was a member of a Communist Party cell. The card was renewed for three years.'

Lapointe looked at his notes.

'He also belonged to the International Theosophical Society, whose headquarters are in Switzerland. Have you heard of it?'

'Yes.'

'Two of the books, I forgot to mention, were about yoga and, right next to them, was a judo manual.'

Piquemal, in short, had tried all the different religions and philosophical and social theories. He was one of those people you saw marching with a fixed stare behind a banner at extremist party parades.

'Is that everything?'

'As far as his room goes, yes. No letters. When I went downstairs I asked the owner if he ever received any and he replied that he hardly ever saw anything in his mail other than leaflets and notifications. I went to the corner café. Unfortunately, it was aperitif time and there were a lot of people at the bar. I had to wait

for ages and have two drinks before being able to talk to the owner without appearing to be making inquiries. I gave him the same spiel, that I'd just arrived from the country and that I was eager to see Piquemal.'

' "The teacher?" he asked.

'Which seems to suggest that in some circles Piquemal passed himself off as a teacher.

' "If you'd come at eight o'clock … Now, he's probably taking a class … I don't know where he has lunch."

' "Was he here this morning?"

' "He stood at the bar next to the croissant basket, as usual. He always eats three. And this morning someone I don't know, who'd arrived before him, went over and spoke to him.

' "As a rule, Monsieur Piquemal isn't sociable. He must have too many things on his mind to waste his time on conversations of no importance. Polite but cold, you know what I mean? Good morning! How much? Good evening! … It doesn't bother me, because I've got other customers, like him, who work with their brains, and I can imagine what it's like.

' "What surprised me the most was to see Monsieur Piquemal go off with the stranger and, instead of turning left as he normally does, they turned right." '

'Did he describe the customer?'

'Vaguely. A man of around forty, who looked like a clerk or a travelling salesman. He came in without a word just before eight o'clock, stood at the end of the bar and ordered a coffee with Calvados. No beard or moustache. On the plump side.'

Maigret couldn't help thinking that the description fitted several dozen inspectors at the Sûreté Nationale.

'You didn't find out anything else?'

'Yes I did. After lunch, I telephoned the École des Ponts et Chaussées again and asked to speak to Piquemal. This time I didn't say who I was and I wasn't asked. I was simply told he hadn't been seen all day.'

'Is he on leave?'

'No. He simply didn't turn up. What's even more surprising is that he didn't telephone to say he wouldn't be coming in. It's the first time that's ever happened.

'I returned to the Hôtel du Berry and went up to my room. Then I knocked on Piquemal's door. I opened it. There was no one there.

Nothing had been moved since my earlier visit.

'You asked me for all the details. I went to the École and pretended I was an old friend from home. I found out where he has his lunch, a hundred metres away in the Rue des Saints-Pères, in a restaurant owned by a couple from Normandy.

'So I went there, but Piquemal didn't show up today. I saw his napkin in a numbered ring and an opened bottle of mineral water on his usual table.

'That's all, chief.

'Did I make any mistakes?'

The reason he anxiously asked that last question was that Maigret's forehead had clouded over and he had a worried frown.

Was this case going to be like the other political case Maigret had been obliged to handle and which had ended with him being sent to Luçon in disgrace?

The first time too it had all happened because of the rivalry between Rue des Saussaies and Quai des Orfèvres, each of the two police departments receiving different orders, at that time protecting opposing interests willy-nilly, because of the struggle between senior political figures.

At midnight, the president of the Council had learned that Point had called in Maigret …

At eight o'clock in the morning, Piquemal, the man who had found the Calame Report, was accosted by a stranger in the little café where he was quietly drinking his coffee, and he followed him without protest, without the slightest argument …

'You've done a good job, my boy.'

'No spelling mistakes?'

'I don't think so.'

'What now?'

'I don't know. Perhaps you'd do best to stay at the Hôtel du Berry, in case Piquemal reappears.'

'If he does, should I phone you?'

'Yes. Here, or at home.'

One of the two men to have read the Calame Report had vanished …

There was still Point, who had also read it, but he was a minister, and so harder to eliminate.

Thinking about it brought back the aftertaste of the previous night's brandy and Maigret fancied a glass of beer in a place where

he could rub shoulders with ordinary people going about their everyday business.

4. Lucas is Not Pleased

Maigret was on his way back from the Brasserie Dauphine, where he had gone for a beer, when he saw Janvier striding purposefully towards the Police Judiciaire.

The mid-afternoon weather was almost warm. The sun had lost its pallor and for the first time that year Maigret had left his overcoat at the office. He shouted ‘Hey!’ two or three times. Janvier froze, spotted him and veered towards him.

‘Do you feel like a drink?’

For no specific reason, Maigret didn’t feel like going back to Quai des Orfèvres straight away. It must have had something to do with the arrival of spring, and also the troubled mood he had been in since the previous evening.

Janvier had a strange look on his face, thought Maigret, that of a man who doesn’t know whether he’s going to be reprimanded or praised. Instead of standing at the bar, they went and sat at the back of the room, which was deserted at that hour.

‘Beer?’

‘If you like.’

They waited in silence until they had been served.

‘We’re not the only ones taking an interest in the lady, chief,’ said Janvier. ‘In fact, I have the impression there are lots of people watching her.’

‘Go on.’

‘My first job this morning was to go and sniff around the ministry, on Boulevard Saint-Germain. I was about a hundred

metres away when on the other side of the road I caught sight of Rougier, who appeared to be watching the sparrows.'

They both knew Gaston Rougier, an inspector from the Sûreté Nationale with whom they were in fact on the best of terms. He was a decent man who lived in the suburbs and always had his pockets full of photographs of his six or seven children.

'Did he see you?'

'Yes.'

'Did he speak to you?'

'Boulevard Saint-Germain was almost empty. I couldn't turn on my heel. When I drew level with him, he asked me:

' "You too?"

'I acted the innocent.

' "Me too, what?"

'Then he winked at me.

' "Nothing. No need to let the cat out of the bag. It seems to be raining familiar faces around here this morning. The annoying thing is that there isn't a single café opposite this wretched ministry."

'From where we were, we could see the interior courtyard and I recognized Ramiré, from Intelligence, who seemed well in with the concierge.

'Playing my part to the hilt, I continued on my way. It was only when I reached Rue de Solférino that I stopped in a café and looked up Blanche Lamotte in the telephone directory on the off-chance. I found her name and address, 63, Rue Vaneau.

'I was just around the corner.'

'Did you bump into the Sûreté again?'

'Not exactly. You know Rue Vaneau: it's quiet, almost provincial, with even a few trees in the gardens. Number 63 consists of rented apartments, modest but comfortable. The concierge was in her lodge peeling potatoes.

' "Mademoiselle Lamotte isn't at home by any chance?" I asked.

'I instantly felt her contempt. But I went on anyway:

' "I'm an assessor for an insurance company. Mademoiselle Lamotte has applied for life insurance and I'm conducting the usual check."

'She didn't burst out laughing but almost. She retorted: "How many different police forces are there in Paris?"

' "I don't know what you mean."

' "Firstly, I've seen you before, I have, with a fat detective chief

inspector whose name escapes me, when the little lady at number 57 overdosed on sleeping pills two years ago. And then your colleagues didn't exactly beat about the bush."

‘ "Were there a lot of them?" I asked.

‘ "First of all, there was the one who came yesterday morning."

‘ "Did he show you his badge?"

‘ "I didn't ask. I'm not asking to see yours either. I'm capable of recognizing a policeman when I see one."

‘ "Did he ask you a lot of questions?"

‘ "A few: whether she lives alone, whether from time to time she has visits from a man in his fifties, on the portly side … I said no."

‘ "Is that the truth?"

‘ "Yes. And then whether she generally comes home carrying a briefcase. I told him sometimes, and that she has a typewriter in her apartment and she often brings work home from the office. I presume you know as well as I do that she's the secretary to a minister?"

‘ "I do know that, yes."

‘ "He also wanted to know whether she had her briefcase the previous evening. I had to admit I hadn't paid attention. Then he pretended to leave. I went up to the first floor where I clean for an elderly lady every morning and I heard him a little later on the staircase. I didn't show myself, but I know he stopped on the third floor, where Mademoiselle Blanche lives, and that he went into her apartment."

‘ "You didn't try and stop him?"

‘ "I've been a concierge long enough to have learned not to get on the wrong side of the police."

‘ "Did he stay long?"

‘ "Around ten minutes."

‘ "Have you seen him again since?"

‘ "Not that one."

‘ "Did you mention any of this to Mademoiselle Blanche?" ’

Maigret listened, staring insistently at his glass, trying to square this incident with the events he had been told about.

Janvier went on:

‘She hesitated. She must've felt herself blushing because she decided to tell me the truth.

‘ "I told her someone had come asking questions about her and had gone up to her floor. I didn't say anything about the police."

‘ “Did she seem surprised?”

‘ “At first, yes. Then she said: ‘I think I know what it’s about.’

‘ “As for the ones that came this morning, who turned up a few minutes after she’d left for work, there were two of them. They told me they were from the police. The shorter one wanted to show me his badge, but I didn’t look at it.”

‘ “Did they also go up?”

‘ “No. They asked me all the same questions, and more.”

‘ “What sort of questions?”

‘ “Whether she goes out often, who with, who her men and women friends are, whether she makes a lot of phone calls, whether __” ’

Maigret interrupted Janvier.

‘What did the concierge say about her?’

‘She gave me the name of one of her friends, a certain Lucile Cristin, who lives locally and probably works in an office, and has a squint. Mademoiselle Blanche has her lunch in a restaurant called Aux Trois Ministères on Boulevard Saint-Germain. In the evening, she cooks for herself. This Lucile Cristin often comes and has dinner with her. I didn’t manage to find out her address.

‘The concierge told me about another friend, who visits Rue Vaneau less frequently, but Mademoiselle Blanche has dinner at her house every Sunday. She’s married to a trader at Les Halles called Hariel and lives in Rue de Courcelles. The concierge thinks she’s from La Roche-sur-Yon, like Mademoiselle Blanche.’

‘Did you go to Rue de Courcelles?’

‘You told me not to leave any stone unturned. Seeing as I don’t even know what all this is about …’

‘Go on.’

‘The information was correct. I went up to Madame Hariel’s apartment. She leads a comfortable life and has three children, the youngest of whom is eight. I said I was the insurance assessor. She didn’t bat an eyelid, from which I conclude that I was the first to go and see her. She met Blanche Lamotte in La Roche, where they were at school together. They lost touch and ran into one another by chance in Paris, three years ago. Madame Hariel invited her friend to her place, and she’s got into the habit of having dinner with them every Sunday. As for the rest, nothing special. Blanche Lamotte has a routine existence, devotes herself fully to her work and speaks warmly of her boss, for whom she would throw herself

under a train.'

'Is that all?'

'No. About a year ago, Blanche asked Madame Hariel's husband whether he knew of a position available for someone she knew who was going through a difficult patch. That was Fleury. Hariel, who sounds like a decent man, gave him a job in his office. Fleury had to be there at six o'clock every morning.'

'What happened?'

'He worked for three days, after which he never showed his face again, nor did he ever apologize. Mademoiselle Blanche was embarrassed. She's the one who was contrite.

'I went back to Boulevard Saint-Germain, intent on going into the Trois Ministères. But from a distance I spotted not only Gaston Rougier, but also one of his colleagues whose name I've forgotten, staking the place out.'

Maigret attempted to put some order into all of this. On Monday evening, Auguste Point had gone to his apartment on Boulevard Pasteur and had left the Calame Report in his study, thinking it was safer there than anywhere else.

But, on Tuesday morning, someone claiming to be from the police had turned up at Mademoiselle Blanche's place in Rue Vaneau and, after asking the concierge a few trivial questions, entered her lodgings.

Was that person really from the police?

If so, the case stank even more than Maigret had feared. But he had a hunch that this first visit had nothing to do with the Sûreté Nationale.

Was it the same man who, finding nothing in the secretary's apartment, had then gone to Boulevard Pasteur and stolen the Calame Report?

'She didn't describe him?'

'Vaguely. A fairly stout, middle-aged fellow who is sufficiently in the habit of questioning people for them to assume he's a policeman.'

It was very similar to the description the owner of the bar in Rue Jacob had given of the man who had accosted Piquemal and left the establishment with him.

But the men of that morning, who had not gone up to the secretary's apartment, sounded very much as if they were from the Sûreté.

‘What do I do now?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘I almost forgot: when I went back to Boulevard Saint-Germain, I thought I saw Lucas in a bar.’

‘It probably was him.’

‘Is he on the same case?’

‘More or less.’

‘Shall I carry on inquiring about the lady?’

‘We’ll discuss it when I’ve seen Lucas. Wait here for a moment.’

Maigret went over to the telephone and called the Police Judiciaire.

‘Is Lucas back?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Is that you, Torrence? As soon as he comes in, will you send him over to me in the Brasserie Dauphine?’

Outside, a boy went past selling the latest edition of the afternoon paper, which had a large headline, and Maigret headed for the door, rummaging in his pocket for change.

When he came back and sat down again next to Janvier, he spread the paper in front of them. The headline, splurged across the entire width of the page, said:

Arthur Nicoud on the Run?

The news was sensational enough to have forced the paper to change its front page.

The Clairfond affair has just taken an unforeseen twist, but one which is not altogether surprising.

We know that following the tragedy, the public was deeply disturbed and demanded that the causes be scrupulously investigated.

The firm Nicoud & Sauvegrain, which built the now infamous sanatorium five years ago, should, according to insiders, have been subjected to a thorough and immediate inquiry.

Why did that not happen? We will probably know the answer in the coming days. The fact remains that Arthur Nicoud, terrified to show himself in public, thought it wise to take cover in a hunting lodge he owns in Sologne.

The police, apparently, know of his whereabouts. Some people even contend that they advised the entrepreneur to disappear for a while to avoid any trouble.

It was only this morning, four weeks after the disaster, that the authorities decided to summon Arthur Nicoud in order to ask him the questions that are on everyone’s lips.

In the early hours, two inspectors from the Sûreté arrived at the lodge,

where they found only a gamekeeper.

He informed the investigators that his master had left the previous evening for an unknown destination.

It did not remain a secret for long. Two hours ago, our special correspondent in Brussels telephoned us to say that Arthur Nicoud had arrived there mid-morning and was occupying a luxurious apartment at the Hôtel Métropole.

Our correspondent managed to meet the entrepreneur and ask him a few questions which we reproduce in full, along with the answers.

'Is it true that you left your hunting lodge in Sologne abruptly because you had been warned that the police were on their way?'

'That is utterly false. I was, and still am, unaware of the intentions of the police, who have known my whereabouts for the past month.'

'Did you leave France in anticipation of new developments?'

'I came to Brussels on construction business.'

'What business?'

'The building of an aerodrome which I have tendered for.'

'Do you intend to go back to France and make yourself available to the authorities?'

'I have no intention of changing my plans in any way.'

'Do you mean that you will stay in Brussels until the Clairfond affair has been forgotten?'

'I repeat that I will stay here for as long as my business keeps me here.'

'Even if an arrest warrant were put out for you?'

'The police had ample opportunity to question me over the past month. Too bad if they didn't!'

'Have you heard of the Calame Report?'

'I don't know what you are talking about.'

With these parting words, Arthur Nicoud put an end to the interview, which our correspondent telephoned through to us at once.

It seems, but we have not been able to obtain confirmation, that an elegant young blonde woman, as yet unidentified, arrived an hour after Nicoud and was shown directly up to his apartment, where reportedly she is still at the time of writing.

The Sûreté Nationale has confirmed that two inspectors had travelled to Sologne to ask the businessman some questions. When we spoke of an arrest warrant, they replied that it was not on the cards for the time being.

'Is this our case?' grunted Janvier, pulling a face.

'Correct.'

He opened his mouth, probably to ask how come Maigret was handling such a sleazy political affair. He said nothing. They could see Lucas crossing the square dragging his left foot a little as usual. He didn't stop at the bar but came and sat facing the two men with a disgruntled look, and mopped his face.

Pointing to the newspaper, he said in a reproachful voice, which

he never used in front of Maigret:

'I've just read it.'

And Maigret felt slightly guilty vis-à-vis his two colleagues. Lapointe too must have realized by now what it was all about.

'A beer?' suggested Maigret.

'No. A Pernod.'

And that too was out of character for Lucas. They waited for the drinks to be served, and then continued in hushed tones.

'I suppose you keep bumping into the big boys from Rue des Saussaies?'

That was how they referred to the squad from the Sûreté Générale.

'You could have advised me to be discreet!' complained Lucas. 'If it's a question of beating them to it, I should warn you they've got a head start on us.'

'Tell us.'

'What?'

'What you did.'

'I started by strolling down Boulevard Saint-Germain, where I arrived a few moments after Janvier.'

'Rougier?' asked the latter, who couldn't help smiling at the funny side of the situation.

'He was standing in the middle of the pavement and saw me coming. I acted as if I was just passing and in a hurry. He called out to me, laughing:

' "Are you looking for Janvier? He's just turned into Rue de Solférino."

'It's always a pleasure to be jeered at by someone from the Sûreté.

'Because I wasn't able to inquire about Jacques Fleury in the vicinity of the ministry, I—'

'You looked him up in the telephone directory?' asked Janvier.

'That didn't occur to me. Knowing that he frequents the bars on the Champs-Élysées, I went to Fouquet's.'

'I bet he's in the phone book.'

'It's possible. Will you let me finish?'

Janvier was in a playful mood now, sneering like someone who has just been scalded and wants to see someone else suffer in turn.

In other words, all three of them, Maigret as well as his two colleagues, were on unfamiliar territory. They all felt equally

awkward, and had no difficulty imagining the jibes of their counterparts in the Sûreté.

'I had a chat with the barman. Everybody knows Fleury. Most of the time he racks up a huge tab and when the total gets too high, they won't serve him any more. Then he disappears for a few days, until he's run out of credit in all the bars and restaurants.'

'Does he pay in the end?'

'One fine evening he comes back looking all exuberant and pays his bill with a nonchalant air.'

'Then the same thing happens all over again?'

'Yes. It's been going on for years.'

'Since he's been at the ministry too?'

'Except that now he's private secretary and is assumed to be influential, so there are more people buying him drinks and inviting him to dinner. Before that, he would sometimes vanish from the scene for months. Once, he was seen working at Les Halles, counting cabbages being unloaded from the trucks.'

Janvier shot Maigret a knowing look.

'He has a wife and two children, somewhere near Vanves. He's supposed to send them enough to live on. Luckily, his wife has a job, something like a housekeeper for an elderly gentleman who lives on his own. The children work too.'

'Who does he hang around the bars with?'

'For a long time he was seen with a woman in her forties, a buxom brunette apparently, known as Marcelle and whom he seemed to be in love with. Rumour has it he found her at the till of a brasserie in the Porte Saint-Martin district. No one knows what's become of her. For just over a year he's been with a certain Jacqueline Page and lives with her in an apartment in Rue Washington, above an Italian delicatessen.

'Jacqueline Page is twenty-three and sometimes works as a film extra. She tries to wangle introductions to all the producers, directors and actors who are regulars at Fouquet's and is generous with her favours.'

'Is Fleury in love with her?'

'He seems to be.'

'Is he jealous?'

'So they say. Only he doesn't dare object, pretends to turn a blind eye.'

'Have you seen her?'

‘I thought it was a good idea to pay a visit to Rue Washington.’

‘What did you tell her?’

‘I didn’t need to tell her anything. The minute she opened the door, she exclaimed: “Another one!” ’

Janvier and Maigret couldn’t help exchanging a smile.

‘Another what?’ asked Maigret, who already knew the answer.

‘Policeman, as you know very well. Two had been there before me.’

‘Separately?’

‘Together.’

‘Did they question her about Fleury?’

‘They asked her if he sometimes worked at night and whether he brought papers home from the ministry.’

‘What did she reply?’

‘That they had better things to do at night. She’s a woman who’s never at a loss for words. Funnily enough, her mother is a chair attendant in the Picpus church.’

‘Did they search the apartment?’

‘They just glanced around. You can’t really call it an apartment. It’s more like a base. They only use the kitchen to make coffee in the morning. The other rooms, a sitting room, a bedroom and what should be the dining room, are untidy, with shoes and women’s underwear strewn all over the place, and magazines, records and trashy novels, not to mention bottles and glasses.’

‘Does Jacqueline see him at lunchtime?’

‘Rarely. Most days she stays in bed until mid-afternoon. From time to time he telephones her in the morning to ask her to meet him at a restaurant.’

‘Do they have many friends?’

‘The people who go to the same clubs.’

‘Is that all?’

For the first time, there was an almost pathetic reproach in Lucas’ voice when he replied:

‘No, it’s not all! You instructed me to find out as much as possible. First of all, I have a list of a dozen of Jacqueline’s former lovers, including some she still sees.’

With a look of disgust, he placed a list of names written in pencil on the table.

‘You will notice that it includes the names of two politicians. Then, I almost managed to find Marcelle.’

‘How?’

‘By pounding the pavements. I went to every brasserie on the Grands Boulevards, starting at Opéra. Of course, the last one was where I struck lucky, Place de la République.’

‘Has Marcelle gone back to working at the till there?’

‘No, but they remember her and she’s been seen in the neighbourhood. The owner of the brasserie thinks she lives nearby, around Rue Blondel. Since he’s often bumped into her in Rue du Croissant, he has the impression that she’s working for a newspaper or at a print works.’

‘Did you check?’

‘Not yet. Should I?’

His tone was such that Maigret muttered, half in jest:

‘Annoyed?’

Lucas attempted to smile.

‘No. But you’ve got to admit it’s a strange job. Especially when you find out afterwards from the papers that it’s to do with that nasty business! If I have to carry on, I’ll carry on. But to be honest with you …’

‘Do you think I’m enjoying this any more than you are?’

‘No. I know.’

‘Rue du Croissant isn’t very long. Everyone knows one another in that world.’

‘And once again I’m going to turn up after the boys from the Sûreté.’

‘Most likely.’

‘Fine! I’ll go. Can I have another?’

He held out his glass, which he had just drained. Maigret signalled to the waiter to bring another round and, at the last minute, ordered a Pernod for himself instead of a beer.

Inspectors from other departments who had finished for the day came in for a drink at the bar, greeting them with a wave. Maigret, his expression becoming gloomy, thought of Auguste Point, who must have read the article and be waiting for his name to appear in the headlines too, any minute now.

His wife, whom he had probably put in the picture, was just as anxious as he was. Had he spoken to Mademoiselle Blanche? Were the three of them aware of all the covert work going on around them?

‘What do I do?’ asked Janvier in the tone of someone disgusted

by the job but resigned to it.

'Have you got the heart to watch Rue Vaneau?'

'All night?'

'No. I'll send Torrence or someone to relieve you at around eleven.'

'Do you have a hunch that something's going to happen there?'

Maigret confessed:

'No.'

He didn't have the least idea. Or rather, he had lots, so tangled that he couldn't think straight.

It was essential to keep to the simplest facts, those that could be checked.

One certainty was that on the Monday afternoon, the Piquemal individual had appeared at the office of the minister of public works. He must have spoken to the clerk on duty and filled in a form. Maigret hadn't seen it, but it would have been filed; Point wouldn't have fabricated this visit.

Two people at least who were in adjacent offices were likely to have overheard the conversation: Mademoiselle Blanche and Jacques Fleury.

The same thing had occurred to the Sûreté, because they had gone to their homes to investigate.

Had Piquemal really handed over the Calame Report to Auguste Point?

It seemed implausible to Maigret that he would have concocted the entire thing, which would have made no sense.

Point had gone to his private apartment on Boulevard Pasteur and had left the document there, in his study. That too Maigret believed was true.

So the person who had broken into Mademoiselle Blanche's the following morning and searched her lodgings wasn't sure where the report was.

But by the afternoon, the document had vanished.

On the Wednesday morning, Piquemal too had disappeared.

Meanwhile, for the first time, Joseph Mascoulin's newspaper had written about the Calame Report and openly asked who secretly had the document.

Maigret started moving his lips and muttering, as if talking to himself.

'It has to be one or the other: either someone stole the report so

as to destroy it, or they stole it to make use of it. So far, apparently, no one has made use of it.'

Lucas and Janvier listened in silence.

'Unless …'

He slowly drank half of his Pernod and wiped his mouth.

'It looks complicated, but in politics things are rarely straightforward. Only one or two of the people compromised by the Clairfond affair have anything to gain by destroying the document. So, if it emerges that it has disappeared again, after having resurfaced for a few hours, suspicion will automatically fall on them.'

'I think I understand,' mumbled Janvier.

'At least thirty politicians, not counting Nicoud himself, risk being embroiled in scandal or worse in this affair. If they can focus suspicion on one individual, fabricate evidence against him, and if that individual is vulnerable, then they have the perfect scapegoat. Auguste Point is defenceless.'

His two colleagues stared at him in amazement. Maigret had forgotten that they only knew half of the details of the case. Things had now gone beyond the stage where it was possible to conceal anything from them.

'He was one of Nicoud's guests at Samois,' he said. 'The entrepreneur gave Point's daughter a gold pen.'

'Have you seen it?'

He nodded.

'Is he the one who …?'

Lucas didn't finish his question. Maigret had understood. He had wanted to ask:

'Is he the one who asked you to help him?'

That finally dispelled the awkwardness that had been hanging over the three men.

'It's him, yes. Right now, I'd be surprised if others haven't found out.'

'We don't have to hide any more?'

'In any case, not from the Sûreté.'

They lingered over their drinks for another quarter of an hour. Maigret was the first to rise. He said goodbye and dropped into his office, just in case. There was nothing for him. Point hadn't telephoned, nor had anyone else involved in the Clairfond affair.

At dinner, Madame Maigret gathered from his expression that it

was best not to ask any questions. He spent the evening reading an international police journal and, at ten o'clock, went to bed.

'Have you got a lot of work?'

They were about to go to sleep. The question had been on the tip of her tongue for some time.

'Not a lot, but it's ugly.'

Twice he nearly reached for the telephone to call Auguste Point. He had no idea what he would have said to him, but he would have liked to have made contact with him.

He got up at eight o'clock. Behind the curtains there was a light mist that pressed up against the windows and seemed to muffle the sounds from the street. He walked to the corner of Boulevard Richard-Lenoir to catch his bus and paused by the newspaper kiosk.

The bombshell had exploded. The papers weren't asking any more questions, but the banner headlines trumpeted:

Clairfond Affair
Disappearance of Jules Piquemal
who found the Calame Report.
The report, handed over to the authorities,
is also alleged to have disappeared.

The newspapers under his arm, he clambered on to the bus and didn't try to read any more until he arrived at Quai des Orfèvres.

As he walked down the corridor, he could hear the telephone ringing in his office. He hastened his step and picked up the receiver.

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret?' asked the operator. 'This is the third time in fifteen minutes that there's been a call for you from the Ministry of Public Works. Shall I put you through?'

He was still wearing his hat and overcoat, slightly damp from the fog.

5. The Professor's Scruples

He sounded like a man who has not slept all night, or the previous nights, and who can no longer be bothered to choose his words because he is beyond the point of worrying about the effect he produces. That flat tone of voice devoid of emphasis or energy is equivalent in a man to a woman crying with her mouth open, not caring that her tears are making her ugly and elicit no sympathy.

'Can you come and see me right now, Maigret? Given the state of affairs, there is no reason for you to avoid Boulevard Saint-Germain unless you have any personal objection to coming here. Let me warn you that the waiting room is heaving with journalists and the phone is ringing nonstop. I promised them a press conference at eleven o'clock.'

Maigret looked at his watch.

'I'll be there straight away.'

There was a knock at the door. Young Lapointe entered while Maigret was still holding the receiver, his brow furrowed.

'Have you got something to tell me?'

'News, yes.'

'Important?'

'I think so.'

'Put your hat on and come with me. You can tell me on the way.'

He paused for a moment in front of the clerk to ask him to inform the chief that he wouldn't be attending the morning briefing. In the courtyard, he went over to one of the little black cars belonging to the Police Judiciaire.

‘Take the wheel.’

And, as they were driving along the embankment:

‘Tell me quickly.’

‘I spent the night at the Hôtel du Berry, in the room I rented.’

‘Piquemal didn’t reappear?’

‘No. Someone from the Sûreté was posted in the street all night.’

Maigret suspected as much. That was not worrying.

‘I didn’t want to go into Piquemal’s room while it was dark, because I’d have had to put the light on, which would have been visible from the street. I waited until daybreak and then conducted a more thorough search of the place than the first time. One of the things I did was to flick through every single book. I found this letter inside a political economy treatise, serving as a bookmark.’

One hand on the steering wheel, with the other he drew his wallet from his pocket and held it out to Maigret.

‘In the left-hand fold. The note with the Chamber of Deputies letterhead.’

It was a small piece of paper, like the memos used by members of the Chamber. The letter was dated the previous Thursday. The handwriting was cramped and careless, with letters overlapping and word endings that were almost illegible.

> *Dear Monsieur,*
>
> *Thank you for your communication. I am extremely interested in what you have told me and I would be pleased to meet you tomorrow, at around 8 p.m., at the Brasserie du Croissant, Rue Montmartre. In the meantime, I would ask you not to speak of this matter to anyone.*
>
> *Yours*

There was no signature proper, but initials which could have been any letters of the alphabet.

‘I suppose it’s from Joseph Mascoulin?’ grunted Maigret.

‘It is from him, yes. I paid a visit early this morning to a friend who’s a stenographer at the Chamber and knows the handwriting of most of the deputies. I only had to show him the first line and the initials.’

They had already reached Boulevard Saint-Germain and Maigret noticed several press cars outside the Ministry of Public Works. He glanced across the street but saw no one from Rue des Saussaies. Had they called off the surveillance now that the bombshell had exploded?

‘Shall I wait for you?’

‘It might be best.’

He crossed the courtyard, went up the main staircase and found himself in a waiting room with a dark-red carpet and yellowish columns where he recognized several faces. Two or three journalists started to make a beeline for him, but an official forestalled them.

‘This way, detective chief inspector. The minister is expecting you.’

Auguste Point stood in the vast, gloomy office lit by lamps, looking shorter and broader than in the apartment on Boulevard Pasteur. He proffered his hand and kept Maigret’s hand in his for a moment, with the insistence of those who have suffered a great shock and are grateful for the smallest display of sympathy.

‘Thank you for coming, Maigret. I am annoyed with myself for having got you mixed up in all this. You see now that I had good reason to be worried!’

He turned towards a woman who was ending a telephone conversation and about to replace the receiver.

‘Let me introduce my secretary, Mademoiselle Blanche, whom I mentioned to you.’

Mademoiselle Blanche stared at Maigret warily. He could sense she was on the defensive. She did not shake his hand but gave a curt greeting.

Her face was nondescript, unappealing, but beneath her simple black dress, adorned only with a narrow white-lace collar, Maigret was surprised to notice a body that had remained young, plump and still highly desirable.

‘If you don’t mind, we’ll go to my apartment. I have never been able to get used to this office, where I always feel uncomfortable. Will you take any telephone calls, Blanche?’

‘Yes, minister.’

Point opened a door at the back of the room and said, still in the same toneless voice:

‘Shall I go ahead of you? The way out is rather complicated.’

He himself was not yet acquainted with the building and he seemed lost in the empty corridors where he sometimes faltered in front of a door.

They found a narrow staircase and at the top crossed two vast, empty rooms. The sight of a passing maid in an apron holding a broom suggested that they had left the official wing of the ministry and were now in the private apartments.

‘I meant to introduce you to Fleury. He was in the adjacent office. But I completely forgot.’

A woman’s voice could be heard. Point pushed open one last door and they found themselves in a drawing room that was smaller than the others, where a woman was sitting by the window and a young woman stood beside her.

‘My wife and my daughter. I thought it best for us to talk in front of them.’

Madame Point could have been any middle-aged woman you see in the street doing her shopping. She too looked tired and drawn, her eyes slightly vacant.

‘First of all, I must thank you, detective chief inspector. My husband has told me everything and I know that the conversation he had with you made him feel a lot better.’

The newspapers with their sensational headlines were scattered on a table.

At first, Maigret paid no attention to the girl, who seemed calmer, more self-possessed than her father and mother.

‘Would you like some coffee?’

It felt a little like a home where there has been a death and the daily routine has suddenly been turned upside-down, with people coming and going, talking and moving about without knowing where to put themselves or what to do.

He was still wearing his overcoat. It was Anne-Marie who invited him to remove it and placed it on the back of a chair.

‘Have you read this morning’s papers?’ asked the minister eventually, without sitting down.

‘I only had time to glance at the headlines.’

‘They haven’t mentioned my name yet, but all the journalists know. They must have received the information in the middle of the night. I was warned by an acquaintance who’s a paste-up artist in Rue du Croissant. I telephoned the president right away.’

‘How did he react?’

‘I don’t know whether he was surprised or not. I don’t feel capable of judging people any more. Of course, I had woken him up. He sounded somewhat surprised, but I found him less upset over the telephone than I expected.’

He still seemed to be speaking reluctantly, without conviction, as if words no longer had any importance.

‘Have a seat, Maigret. Forgive me for standing, but since this

morning I haven't been able to sit down. It makes me feel anxious. I need to be on my feet, to move about. When you arrived, I'd been pacing my office for an hour while my secretary answered the telephone. Now, where was I? Yes. The president said something along the lines of:

‘ “Well, my friend, you'll have to face the music!”

‘I think those were his words. I asked him whether Piquemal was being held on his orders. Instead of replying directly, he said quietly:

‘ “What makes you think that?”

‘Then he explained that he couldn't be certain of what went on in his department, any more than I or any other minister could. He went off on a great long digression on the subject.

‘ “People hold us responsible for everything,” he said. “They don't realize that we are mere bystanders and that those under our authority know it. They served a different master yesterday and may have another tomorrow.”

‘I suggested:

‘ “The best thing would probably be for me to offer you my resignation tomorrow morning.”

‘ “Not so fast, Point. You've caught me off guard. In politics, things rarely go according to plan. I'm going to think over your offer and call you back later.”

‘I presume he made a few telephone calls to some of our colleagues. Perhaps they held a meeting? I don't know. Now, they have no reason to keep me in the loop.

‘I spent the rest of the night pacing up and down my bedroom while my wife tried to reason with me.’

She gave Maigret a look as if to say:

‘Help me! You can see what a state he's in!’

It was true. On the night they had met in the apartment on Boulevard Pasteur, Point had seemed to Maigret like a man reeling from the blow he had just been dealt, who still did not know how he would cope with it, but had not yet given up.

But now he spoke as if events no longer concerned him, as if his fate had been decided, and he had stopped fighting.

‘Did he call you back?’ asked Maigret.

‘At around five thirty. As you can see, quite a few of us had a sleepless night. He told me that my resignation wouldn't resolve anything, that it would be seen as an admission of guilt and that all

I needed to do was speak the truth.'

'Including about the contents of the Calame Report?' asked Maigret.

Point managed a smile.

'No. Not exactly. Just as I thought the conversation was over, he added:

' "I imagine you'll be asked if you have read the report."

'I replied:

' "I have read it."

' "That's what I gathered. It is a rather fat report, filled, I presume, with technical details on a subject that a man of law is not necessarily acquainted with. It would be more exact to say you had browsed through it. You no longer have the report to hand to refresh your memory. I'm telling you this to protect you from more serious difficulties than those that await you. If you talk about the content of the report or point the finger at people, at anyone – that's none of my business and I don't care – you'll be accused of making allegations that you can't substantiate. Do you follow me?" '

For the third time at least since the beginning of the conversation, Point re-lit his pipe and his wife turned to Maigret:

'You may smoke too, I'm used to it.'

'The telephone started ringing from seven o'clock this morning. It's mainly journalists who want to ask me questions. At first, I replied that I had no comment. Then the tone became almost threatening. Two newspaper editors called me in person. In the end, I agreed to give a press conference in my office at eleven o'clock.

'I needed to see you beforehand. I don't suppose …'

He had been brave enough, perhaps out of shyness, perhaps out of fear or superstition, to refrain from asking until then.

'I don't suppose you have found anything?'

Maigret extracted the letter from his pocket and held it out without saying a word. Was he deliberately exaggerating his movements so as to inspire a certain confidence in the minister? There was something uncharacteristically theatrical in his gesture.

Madame Point didn't move from the sofa where she was sitting, but Anne-Marie crossed the room and read over her father's shoulder.

'Who is it from?' she queried.

Maigret asked Point:

'Do you recognize the handwriting?'

‘It looks vaguely familiar, even though I can’t identify it.’

‘This letter was sent last Thursday by Joseph Mascoulin.’

‘To whom?’

‘To Jules Piquemal.’

There was a silence. Wordlessly, Point held the letter out to his wife. Each tried to weigh up the significance of this discovery.

When Maigret spoke, it was to carry out a sort of interrogation, like at Boulevard Pasteur.

‘What is your relationship with Mascoulin?’

‘We don’t have one.’

‘Did you fall out?’

‘No.’

Point was solemn, worried. Although Maigret never got involved in politics, he was familiar with parliamentary behaviour. Generally speaking, even if the deputies were from opposing parties, even if they attacked one another viciously in parliament, they maintained cordial relations similar to those of the schoolroom or the barracks.

‘You don’t talk to him?’ Maigret pressed him.

Point wiped his hand across his brow.

‘It all goes back a few years, to when I had just entered parliament. A brand-new parliament, you’ll probably recall, when we had sworn there’d be no more shady goings-on.

‘It was immediately after the war and the country was riding on a wave of idealism. People wanted integrity.

‘Most of my colleagues, in any case a large proportion of them, like me, were new to politics.’

‘Not Mascoulin.’

‘No. There were still a few old political hands, but everyone was convinced that the newcomers would set the tone. After a few months, I was no longer so certain. After two years, I was disillusioned. Do you remember, Henriette?’ he said, turning to his wife.

‘So much so that he decided not to stand for re-election,’ she said.

‘During a dinner where I had to make a speech, I said that I had cause for concern, and the press was there to note my words. I wouldn’t be surprised if they regurgitated part of my speech any day now. The subject, in a way, was dirty hands. In substance, I explained that it isn’t our political system that is flawed but the atmosphere in which politicians live, whether they like it or not.

‘I don’t need to go into detail. You will remember the famous

headline: *The Republic of Cronies.* We are together every day, we shake hands like old friends. By the time parliament's been in session for a few weeks, everyone's on first-name terms and politicians do one another small favours.

'Each day you shake more hands and if those hands aren't very clean, you shrug indulgently.

' "Well! He's not a bad fellow."

'Or else:

' "He has to do that to keep his voters happy."

'Do you understand? I said that if each of us refused, once and for all, to shake dirty hands, the hands of schemers, the political atmosphere would be cleansed.'

He added bitterly after a while:

'I practised what I preached. I avoided some dodgy journalists and businessmen who haunt the corridors of the Palais-Bourbon. I refused to do influential voters any favours, which I didn't feel I owed them.

'And, one day, in the Salle des Pas Perdus of the National Assembly, Mascoulin came over to me proffering his hand. I pretended not to see him and turned pointedly to another colleague.

'I know he turned ashen and has never forgotten it. He's the sort of man who doesn't forgive.'

'Did you behave similarly towards Hector Tabard, the editor of *La Rumeur*?'

'I refused to see him two or three times and he didn't press the matter.'

He looked at his watch.

'I have one hour left, Maigret. At eleven o'clock, I'll have to face the press and answer their questions. I thought of giving them a release, but that wouldn't be enough for them.

'I'll have to tell them that Piquemal brought me the Calame Report and that I went to my apartment on Boulevard Pasteur to read it.'

'And that you read it!'

'I'll try to be less categorical. The hardest thing, the impossible part, will be admitting that I left the famous report in an apartment with no security and that when I went to fetch it the next day to hand it to the president of the Council, it had gone.

'No one will believe me. Piquemal's disappearance doesn't make things any easier, on the contrary. They'll say that by some means

or other I have eliminated an embarrassing witness.

'The only thing that would save me would be to deliver up the person who stole the document.'

He added apologetically, as if to excuse his rancour:

'That was too much to ask for in forty-eight hours, even from you. What do you think I should do?'

Madame Point broke in, adamant.

'Offer your resignation and take us back to La Roche-sur-Yon. People who know you will realize that you're not guilty. As for the others, you don't need to worry about them. Your conscience is clear, isn't it?'

Maigret's gaze lighted on Anne-Marie's face and he saw her pinch her lips together. He gathered that the girl did not share her mother's view and that for her such a retreat on her father's part would probably mean the end of her hopes.

'What do you think?' murmured Point, wavering.

That was a responsibility that Maigret could not shoulder.

'What do you say?'

'I think I should stand firm. At least, if there's the remotest chance of finding the thief.'

Again, it was an indirect question.

'I always remain hopeful, right until the last minute,' said Maigret, 'otherwise I would never embark on an investigation. Because I'm not familiar with the world of politics, I lost time in procedures that might seem futile. But I'm not sure they're as futile as all that.'

Before Point appeared in front of the press, Maigret had to, if not restore his confidence, at least give him a certain assurance. He launched into a pared-down summary of the situation.

'You see, minister, we are now on territory where I am much more at home. Until now, I had to work without anyone being aware of my involvement, but that still didn't prevent us coming up against the people from the Sûreté the entire time. Whether it was at the door of your ministry, or that of your secretary, at Piquemal's place or outside the home of your private secretary, my men invariably ran into the boys from Rue des Saussaies on surveillance.

'I wondered at one point what they were looking for and whether the two departments weren't carrying out a parallel investigation.

'Now, I think they simply wanted to know what we would find out. It wasn't you, or your secretary, or Piquemal, or Fleury who

were under surveillance, but me and my men.

'From the moment the disappearance of Piquemal and of the report became official, their inquiry came under the jurisdiction of the Police Judiciaire, because it took place in Paris.

'A man doesn't disappear without trace.

'And a burglar invariably gets caught.'

'Sooner or later!' muttered Point with a rueful smile.

Maigret rose and looked him in the eyes, saying:

'It's up to you to hold firm until then.'

'It doesn't only depend on me.'

'It depends above all on you.'

'If Mascoulin is the one behind this plotting, it won't be long before he brings in the government.'

'Unless he'd rather take advantage of what he knows to increase his influence.'

Point watched him in surprise.

'You know? I thought you kept out of politics.'

'That doesn't only happen in politics and there are Mascoulins in other spheres. I think – stop me if I'm mistaken – that his one obsession is power, but he's a cold-blooded animal who bides his time. Every so often he drops a thunderbolt in the Chamber of Deputies and in the press by revealing some abuse or some scandal.'

Point listened with renewed interest.

'That is how he has gradually built up a reputation as a ruthless righter of wrongs. So that all the fanatics, all the disgruntled, all the rebels like Piquemal turn to him when they discover, or think they've discovered, something unsavoury.

'I imagine he receives the same sort of mail as we do when a mysterious crime is committed. Madmen, the unhinged and maniacs write to us, and so do people who see an opportunity to vent their hatred for a relative, a former friend or a neighbour. But in among the pile, there are letters that give us real clues and without which a good number of murderers would still be at large.

'Piquemal-the-loner, who has sought the truth in all the extremist parties, in all the different religions and philosophies, is precisely the sort of man who, on discovering the Calame Report, didn't think for one moment to pass it on to his direct superiors, of whom he is wary.

'He turned to the professional righter of wrongs, convinced that the report would thus escape goodness-knows-what conspiracy of

silence.'

'If Mascoulin has the report in his hands, why has he not made use of it yet?'

'For the reason I gave you. From time to time he needs to create an outcry, so as to boost his reputation. But the scandal sheets like *La Rumeur* don't publish all the information they have either. It is the affairs they don't write about that are the most lucrative, through blackmail.

'The Calame Report is too juicy a morsel to feed to the public.

'If Mascoulin has it, how many senior figures do you think he has at his mercy, including Arthur Nicoud?'

'A lot. Several dozen.'

'We don't know how many copies of the Calame Report he has in his hands, which he can produce when the time is ripe to enable him to achieve his ends.'

'I had thought of that,' admitted Point. 'And that's what frightens me! If he's the one who has the report, it will be in a secure place and I'd be surprised if we found it. But if we don't make it public, or if we don't have evidence that a particular person has destroyed it, I will be disgraced, because people will accuse me of having hushed it up.'

Maigret saw Madame Point look away to hide a tear running down her cheek. Point saw it too, and lost his composure for a moment, whereas Anne-Marie exclaimed:

'Mother!'

Madame Point shook her head as if to say it was nothing and hastily left the room.

'You see!' said her husband as if there were no need for any comment.

Was Maigret wrong? Was he allowing himself to be affected by the dramatic atmosphere around him? He announced, as if sure of himself:

'I can't promise I'll find the report, but I'll lay hands on the man or woman who broke into your apartment to steal it. That *is* my job.'

'Do you think you can?'

'I am certain of it.'

He was on his feet. Point murmured:

'I'll come down with you.'

And, to his daughter:

‘Run and tell your mother what the inspector just said to me. It will make her feel better.’

They retraced the route they had taken through the back corridors of the ministry and found themselves in Point’s office where, apart from Mademoiselle Blanche who was answering the telephone, a tall, thin individual with grey hair was sorting the post.

‘May I introduce Jacques Fleury, my principal private secretary? … Detective Chief Inspector Maigret …’

Maigret had the feeling he had already seen the man somewhere, probably in a bar or restaurant. He looked dapper, dressed with an elegance that contrasted with the minister’s casualness. He was the quintessential type found in the cafés of the Champs-Élysées in the company of pretty women.

His hand was dry, his handshake firm. From a distance, he appeared younger, more energetic than close up, when the bags under his eyes were visible, and a sort of droop of the lips, which he covered up by smiling nervously.

‘How many are there of them?’ Point asked, jerking his head towards the waiting room.

‘At least thirty. The correspondents from the foreign papers are here too. I don’t know how many photographers there are. They’re still arriving.’

Maigret and the minister exchanged a look. Maigret seemed to be saying, with an encouraging wink:

‘Stand firm!’

Point asked him:

‘Will you be leaving via the waiting room?’

‘Since you’re going to tell them that I’m in charge of the investigation, it’s not a problem. On the contrary.’

He was aware of the suspicious gaze of Mademoiselle Blanche, whom he had not had time to charm. She still seemed unsure what to think of him. Perhaps, however, her boss’s serenity would make her think that Maigret’s involvement was a good thing.

When Maigret walked through the waiting room, the photographers were the first to race over and he made me attempt to avoid them. Then the reporters fired questions at him.

‘Are you investigating the Calame Report?’

He brushed them off with a smile.

‘In a few minutes, the minister will answer your questions

himself.'

'You don't deny that you're handling it?'

'I'm not denying anything.'

Some followed him down the marble stairs, hoping to extract a comment from him.

'Ask the minister,' he repeated.

One inquired:

'Do you think that Piquemal's been murdered?'

It was the first time this hypothesis had been stated openly.

'You know my usual answer,' he replied: 'I don't think anything.'

A few moments later, after more snaps, he clambered into the Police Judiciaire car where Lapointe, in the driver's seat, had spent his time reading the newspapers.

'Where are we going? To headquarters?'

'No. Boulevard Pasteur. What do the papers say?'

'They concentrate mainly on Piquemal's disappearance. One of them, I can't remember which, went and interviewed Madame Calame, who's still in the apartment where she lived with her husband, on Boulevard Raspail. Apparently, she's a small, lively woman who doesn't mince her words and doesn't try to evade questions.

'She hasn't read the report but clearly remembers that around five years ago her husband went to spend several weeks in Haute-Savoie. On his return, he was very busy and often worked late into the night.

' "He had never received so many phone calls," she said. "Lots of people came to see him, whom we didn't know from Adam or Eve. He was preoccupied, anxious. When I asked him what was worrying him, he told me that it was his work and his responsibilities. He would often talk about responsibilities around that time. I had the sense that something was eating him up. I knew he was ill. A year earlier the doctor had told me that he was suffering from cancer. I remember that one day he sighed: 'My God! It's so hard for a man to know where his duty lies!' " '

They drove down Rue de Vaugirard, where a bus forced them to go slowly.

'There's an entire column,' added Lapointe.

'What has she done with her husband's papers?'

'She's left everything as it was in his office, which she cleans regularly as she did when he was alive.'

‘Has she received any visits recently?’

‘Two,’ replied Lapointe darting an admiring look at his chief.

‘Piquemal?’

‘Yes. That was the first visit, about a week ago.’

‘Did she know him?’

‘Fairly well. When Calame was alive, he often used to come to ask for his advice. She thinks he did something to do with mathematics. He explained that he wanted to retrieve one of his papers, which he had left with the professor.’

‘Did he find it?’

‘He had a briefcase with him. She showed him into the study, where he stayed alone for around an hour. When he left, she asked him the question and he replied that no, unfortunately his papers must have been mislaid. She didn’t look inside his briefcase. She wasn’t suspicious. It was only two days later—’

‘Who was the second visitor?’

‘A man in his forties, who claimed to be a former student of Calame’s and asked if she had kept his papers. He also talked about projects they had worked on together.’

‘Did she allow him into the study?’

‘No. She found the coincidence strange to say the least and told him that all her husband’s papers had remained at the École des Ponts et Chaussées.’

‘Did she describe the second visitor?’

‘The paper doesn’t say. If she did, the reporter is keeping the information to himself and is probably pursuing his own little investigation.’

‘Park alongside the kerb. It’s here.’

During the day, the boulevard was as quiet as at night, with the same reassuring air of middle-class respectability.

‘Shall I wait for you?’

‘You’re coming with me. We might have some work to do.’

The glazed door of the lodge was on the left of the entrance. The concierge was a tired-looking elderly woman with a somewhat regal manner.

‘What is it?’ she asked the two men without getting up from her armchair, while a ginger cat jumped off her lap and came and rubbed itself against Maigret’s legs.

He gave his name and took care to remove his hat and to speak in a deferential tone.

‘Monsieur Point has put me in charge of an investigation into a theft from his apartment two days ago.’

‘A theft? Here? And he didn’t tell me?’

‘He’ll confirm it when he sees you and, if you have any doubts, you can simply telephone him.’

‘There’s no need. Since you’re a chief inspector, I have to believe you, don’t I? How could that have happened? This is a quiet building. The police have never had to set foot here in all my thirty-five years as concierge.’

‘I’d like you to think back to last Tuesday, especially the morning.’

‘Tuesday … Wait … That was the day before yesterday …’

‘Yes. The previous evening, the minister came to his apartment.’

‘Did he tell you that?’

‘Not only did he tell me, but I met him there. You let me in just after ten p.m.’

‘I think I remember, yes.’

‘He must have left shortly after I did.’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you open the door to anyone else that night?’

‘Certainly not. It’s rare for residents to come home after midnight. They are quiet people. If that had happened, I’d have remembered.’

‘What time do you unlock the door in the morning?’

‘At half past six, sometimes seven.’

‘Do you then stay in your lodge?’

The concierge’s quarters consisted of only one room, with a gas oven, a round table, a sink and, behind a curtain, a bed with a dark-red cover.

‘Except when I sweep the stairs.’

‘At what time?’

‘Not before nine o’clock. After that I deliver the post, which arrives at around half past eight.’

‘Because the lift shaft is glazed, I imagine that when you are on the stairs, you can see who is going up or down?’

‘Yes. I automatically look.’

‘That morning, did you see anyone go up to the fourth floor?’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘No one in the morning, or even in the early afternoon, asked you whether the minister was at home?’

‘There was just a phone call.’

‘To you?’

‘No. To the apartment.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I was on the stairs between the fourth and fifth floors.’

‘What time was that?’

‘Ten o’clock maybe? Perhaps just before? With my legs, I can’t work fast any more. I heard the phone ringing inside the apartment. It went on for a long time. Then, fifteen minutes later, when I’d finished my cleaning and gone back downstairs, the phone rang again. I even muttered: “You can keep ringing!” ’

‘And then?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Did you go back inside your lodge?’

‘To freshen up.’

‘You didn’t leave the building?’

‘Only as I do every morning, for around fifteen or twenty minutes, to do my shopping. The grocer next door, the butcher just on the corner. From the grocer’s I can see who’s coming and going. I always keep an eye on the place.’

‘And from the butcher’s?’

‘I can’t see, but I don’t stay long. I live alone with my cat. I buy the same thing almost every day. At my age, you lose your appetite.’

‘You don’t know exactly what time you were at the butcher’s?’

‘Not exactly, no. There’s a big clock above the till, but I never look at it.’

‘When you got back home, you didn’t see anyone leave who you hadn’t seen going in?’

‘I don’t remember. No. I pay less attention to the people going out than to those going in, naturally, except for the residents, because I have to be able to say whether they’re at home or not. There are always deliveries, people from the gas company, vacuum-cleaner salesmen …’

He knew he wouldn’t get any more out of her, but that if she recalled some detail later she would be sure to let him know.

‘My inspector and I are going to question your residents,’ said Maigret.

‘If you like. You’ll see that they are all decent people, except perhaps the little old lady on the third floor who …’

The thought of carrying out this routine made Maigret feel

dispirited.

'We'll come back and see you on our way out,' he promised.

And he made sure, on leaving, to stroke the cat's head.

'You take the apartments on the left,' he instructed Lapointe. 'I'll deal with the ones on the right. Do you understand what I'm looking for?'

He added light-heartedly:

'To work, my friend!'

6. Lunch at the Filet de Sole

Before ringing the first doorbell, Maigret had second thoughts and turned to Lapointe, who was reaching for the button.

'Aren't you thirsty?'

'No, chief.'

'You start, then. I'll be back in a minute.'

He had just remembered a telephone call he needed to make. At a pinch, he could phone from the concierge's lodge, except that he would rather not speak in front of a witness. And he wouldn't mind a drink, a glass of white wine, for instance.

He had to walk around a hundred metres before he found a tiny café where, apart from the owner, there wasn't a soul.

'A white wine,' he ordered.

He changed his mind.

'No, a Pernod.'

That was more in keeping with his mood and with the weather, and with the smell of this immaculate little bar where it seemed no one ever came.

He waited until he had been served and had drunk half of his Pernod before walking over to the booth.

Newspaper reports of crime investigations give the impression that the police follow a straight line and know where they are going from the outset. Events follow on from one another logically, like the entrances and exits of characters in a well-directed play.

There is rarely any mention of the pointless comings and goings, the meticulous following-up of leads that turn out to be red

herrings, or the random probing in different directions.

There had not been a single investigation during which Maigret hadn't floundered at some stage.

That morning at the Police Judiciaire, he hadn't had the time to debrief Lucas, Janvier and Torrence, whom he had sent off to pursue lines of inquiry that seemed unimportant now.

'Police Judiciaire? Would you put me on to Lucas? If he's not there, give me Janvier.'

It was Lucas' voice he heard on the other end of the line.

'Is that you, chief?'

'Yes. Firstly, I have an urgent job for you. You must get hold of a photograph of Piquemal, the fellow from the École des Ponts et Chaussées. No point looking in his hotel room. There aren't any. I expect there's a group photo at the École, the usual end-of-year class photo, which the Criminal Records people will be able to do something with.

'Tell them to work as fast as they can. There's still time for the photo to appear in the afternoon papers. And it should also be sent out to every police force. And leave no stone unturned, have someone take a quick look around the Forensic Institute.'

'Understood, chief.'

'Have you got any news?'

'I found the woman called Marcelle. Her name is Marcelle Luquet.'

Maigret had already mentally abandoned that avenue, but he didn't want Lucas to think his efforts were all for nothing.

'And?'

'She works as a proof-reader at the Imprimerie du Croissant, where she's on the night shift. That's not where they print *La Rumeur* or *Le Globe*. She's heard of Tabard, but she doesn't know him personally. She's never met Mascoulin.'

'Did you talk to her?'

'I bought her a coffee in Rue Montmartre. She's a decent woman. She lived alone until she met Fleury and fell in love with him. She still is. She doesn't hold a grudge against him for leaving her and if he asked her tomorrow, she'd go back to him without a word of reproach. She says he's a big baby who needs help and affection. She claims that while he's capable of minor cheating, like children, he's incapable of serious wrongdoing.'

'Is Janvier there with you?'

‘Yes.’

‘Put him on.’

Janvier had nothing to report. He had loitered opposite the apartment block in Rue Vaneau until Torrence came to relieve him, around midnight.

‘Blanche Lamotte came home, on foot, alone, at around eleven p.m. and went up to her apartment, where the light stayed on for about half an hour.’

‘There was no one from the Sûreté in the area?’

‘No one. I was able to count the people from the street coming home from the cinema or the theatre.’

Torrence’s watch had been even quieter. During the entire night, he had only seen seven passers-by in Rue Vaneau.

‘The light went on at six a.m. I presume she gets up early to do her housework. She went out at ten past eight and headed in the direction of Boulevard Saint-Germain.’

Maigret went back to the bar to finish his Pernod and since it was a light drink, he had another one while he filled his pipe.

When he went back into the apartment building on Boulevard Pasteur, he could hear that Lapointe was on his third apartment and he patiently began to do his share.

Questioning people can sometimes take a while. At that hour, the two men found only women busy with their housework. Their initial reflex was to shut the door in their faces because they thought Maigret and Lapointe were door-to-door salesmen or insurance brokers. When they heard the word ‘police’, they all recoiled.

While they talked, their minds were elsewhere – on what they had on the stove, the baby playing on the floor or the electric vacuum cleaner which was still running. Some were embarrassed at being caught looking unkempt and they automatically tried to smooth their hair.

‘Try to think back to Tuesday morning …’

‘Tuesday, yes …’

‘Did you happen to open your door between ten o’clock and midday?’

The first woman Maigret asked hadn’t been at home on Tuesday but at the hospital, where her sister had been undergoing surgery. The second, who was young and had a child balanced on her hip, kept muddling up Tuesday and Wednesday.

‘I was here, yes. I’m always here in the mornings. I do my shopping in the late afternoon, when my husband is back.’

‘Did you open your door?’

With infinite patience, he had to gently bring her back to the atmosphere of that Tuesday morning. If they had asked the women outright: ‘Did you see a person who is not a resident going up to the fourth floor in the lift or on the stairs?’, they would have replied no, in good faith, without taking the trouble to think.

Maigret caught up with Lapointe on the third floor because no one was home in the left-hand apartment on the second floor.

In keeping with the character of the building, the residents lived seemingly uneventful, ordinary family lives behind closed doors. The aroma changed from one floor to the next, as did the colour of the wallpaper, but everything reflected the honest, hard-working class of people who are always slightly afraid of the police.

Maigret was struggling with a deaf old lady who hadn’t asked him in and made him repeat every question. He heard Lapointe’s voice coming from the opposite apartment.

‘Why would I have opened my door?’ shouted the deaf woman. ‘Is that minx of a concierge accusing me of spying on the residents?’

‘Not at all, madame. No one’s accusing you of anything.’

‘So why are the police coming here asking me questions?’

‘We’re trying to establish whether a man—’

‘What man?’

‘A man we don’t know but whom we’re looking for.’

‘What are you looking for?’

‘A man.’

‘What has he done?’

He was still trying to get her to understand when the door opposite opened. Lapointe signalled that he was on to something and Maigret abruptly took his leave of the peeved old woman.

‘May I introduce Madame Gaudry, chief? Her husband works in a bank on Boulevard des Italiens. Her son is five.’

Maigret glimpsed the boy behind his mother, clinging on to her dress with both hands.

‘In the mornings, she sometimes sends the boy on an errand to one of the nearby shops, but only those on this side of the street.’

‘I don’t let him cross the road on his own. I always leave the door ajar when he’s out. So on Tuesday—’

‘Did you hear someone going upstairs?’

‘Yes. I was expecting Bob. For a moment, I thought it was him. Most people take the lift, but I don’t allow him to yet.’

‘I could!’ asserted the boy. ‘I already made it work.’

‘And you were punished. Anyway, I glanced out just as a man stepped on to the landing and headed up to the fourth floor.’

‘What time was that?’

‘Around half past ten. I’d just put a stew on the stove.’

‘Did the man speak to you?’

‘No. At first I only saw his back. He was wearing a lightweight beige coat, maybe a raincoat, I didn’t take much notice. He had broad shoulders, a fairly thick neck.’

She darted a look at Maigret’s neck.

‘My portly build?’

She hesitated, blushing.

‘Not quite. He was younger. In his forties, I would say. I caught a glimpse of his face when he reached the bend in the stairs. He glared at me and seemed annoyed that I was there.’

‘Did he stop on the fourth floor?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did he ring a doorbell?’

‘No. He went into Monsieur Point’s apartment, although it did take him a while to open the door.’

‘As if he were trying several keys?’

‘I can’t say that, but as if he wasn’t used to the lock.’

‘Did you see him leave?’

‘I didn’t because this time he took the lift.’

‘Much later?’

‘Less than ten minutes.’

‘Were you on the landing all that time?’

‘No. Only Bob still wasn’t back and the door was half-open. I heard the lift go up, stop at the fourth and come back down again.’

‘Apart from his portliness, could you describe him?’

‘It’s hard to say. His face was ruddy, like that of a man who enjoys his food.’

‘Glasses?’

‘I don’t think so. I’m sure not.’

‘Was he smoking a pipe? A cigarette?’

‘No … Wait … I’m almost certain he was smoking a cigar … It struck me because my brother-in-law …’

The description was similar to that given by the bar owner in Rue

Jacob of the man who had accosted Piquemal, with the additional detail of the cigar. It could also match that of the stranger who had broken into Mademoiselle Blanche's lodgings in Rue Vaneau.

A few minutes later, Maigret and Lapointe were outside in the street.

'Where are we going?'

'Drop me at headquarters. Then go to Rue Vaneau and Rue Jacob to find out whether the man had been smoking a cigar by any chance.'

Back at his office, he found that Lucas had already got hold of a photograph in which Piquemal was shown. He was in the back row, unfortunately, but it was clear enough for the experts in Criminal Records to work on.

He asked to see the commissioner and spent almost half an hour bringing him up to date.

'That's what I like to hear,' sighed the chief when Maigret had finished.

'Me too.'

'I'll be even happier when we find out – if we ever do – who this fellow is.'

They both had the same niggling doubt which they preferred not to voice. Was it possible that the individual who had been seen by three witnesses might be someone from their rival department in Rue des Saussaies?

Maigret had good friends in the Sûreté, one in particular called Catroux, whose son he had helped rise through the ranks. He was reluctant to turn to him, because if Catroux knew something, Maigret risked compromising him.

Shortly, the photograph of Piquemal would be in the afternoon newspapers. Would it not be ironic if the man the Police Judiciaire was looking for was in the hands of the Sûreté?

They might have taken him out of circulation for a while because he knew too much.

The other possibility was that they had taken him to Rue des Saussaies to worm information from him.

The newspapers were going to announce that the Police Judiciaire was handling the investigation, which would be headed by Maigret.

It would be fair game for the Sûreté to let him launch his manhunt and then, within a few hours, announce that they had

caught Piquemal.

'You are certain, of course, that Point is to be believed and isn't hiding anything from you, aren't you?' his chief pressed him.

'I'd swear it.'

'His entourage as well?'

'That's my impression. I have investigated all of them. Admittedly, I don't know everything about their lives, but what I do know makes me think we should be looking elsewhere. The letter I showed you …'

'Mascoulin?'

'He is definitely mixed up in this business. The letter proves it.'

'What are you going to do?'

'It may not get me any further, but I want to get a closer look at him, for no particular reason. All I need to do is go and have lunch at the Filet de Sole, Place des Victoires, where he reportedly holds court.'

'Be careful.'

'I know.'

He dropped into the inspectors' office to give some instructions. Lapointe had just come in.

'Well? The cigars?'

'It's odd that it's a woman who noticed that detail. The café owner was unable to say for certain whether the man was smoking a pipe, a cigar or a cigarette, even though he stood at the bar for over a quarter of an hour. But he reckons it was most likely a cigar. Mademoiselle Blanche's concierge, however, was adamant.'

'Was he smoking a cigar?'

'No. A cigarette. He dropped the butt on the stairs and crushed it with his shoe.'

It was one o'clock when Maigret entered the famous restaurant on Place des Victoires, with an unpleasant tightening of his chest, because it is not advisable, when you are a mere public servant, to confront a Mascoulin.

He had nothing on the man, apart from a brief note for which the deputy could give a hundred plausible explanations. And, here, Mascoulin was on his own turf. Maigret was an intruder and the head waiter watched him enter without stepping forwards to greet him.

'Do you have a table?'

'How many people?'

‘I am alone.’

Most of the tables were taken and there was a steady buzz of conversation amid the clatter of cutlery and the clinking of glasses. The head waiter looked around and showed Maigret to a small table wedged next to the revolving door.

There were three other free tables, but, had Maigret said anything, he would probably have been told they were reserved, which was very likely.

The cloakroom attendant eventually came and took his overcoat and hat. He then had to wait a good while before a waiter took his order, which gave him time to observe the entire room.

The restaurant was frequented by important people and, at lunch, it was full of men – financiers, lawyers, journalists and politicians, all moving in the same circles and acknowledging one another across the room with a little nod or a wave.

Some had recognized Maigret and at several tables people were probably whispering about him.

Joseph Mascoulin was sitting in the corner, on the banquette, in the company of Maître Pinard, a lawyer who was almost as renowned as the deputy for the ferocity of his defence speeches.

A third guest had his back to Maigret, a middle-aged man with tapering shoulders and wispy grey hair combed over his head. It was only when he saw him in profile that Maigret recognized Sauvegrain, Nicoud’s brother-in-law and partner, whose photograph he had seen in the newspapers.

Already Mascoulin, who was eating a rib steak, had spotted Maigret and was staring at him as if there were nothing else of interest in the room. At first his eyes showed curiosity, and then a little glint of irony, and now he seemed to be waiting with amusement for Maigret’s next move.

The waiter came over at last and Maigret requested a half-bottle of Pouilly and carried on puffing on his pipe, meeting Mascoulin’s gaze. The difference between them was that, as always in these cases, Maigret’s eyes looked vacant. He made it seem that whatever he was staring at was as neutral and uninteresting as a blank wall, and that he was thinking of nothing other than the sole Dieppoise he had just ordered.

He by no means knew the full story of Nicoud and his company. Rumour had it that Sauvegrain, the brother-in-law, had been a nobody until he married Nicoud’s sister a decade ago, was only

nominally part of the company. He had an office, Avenue de la République, not far from Nicoud's. This office was vast, luxurious, but Sauvegrain spent his days there waiting for visitors of no consequence sent to keep him busy.

If Mascoulin entertained him openly at his table, he must have his reasons. And was Maître Pinard there because he handled Sauvegrain's affairs?

A newspaper editor stopped at Maigret's table on his way out and shook his hand.

'On a case?' he asked him.

And, since Maigret pretended not to understand:

'I don't think I've ever seen you here.'

He glanced over towards Mascoulin's corner.

'I didn't know the Police Judiciaire got involved in this sort of thing. Have you found Piquemal?'

'Not yet.'

'Still looking for the Calame Report?'

He said this in a jeering tone, as if the Calame Report had only existed in some people's imaginations, or if it did exist, Maigret would never find it.

'We're looking,' he merely replied.

The journalist opened his mouth, thought better of it and left with a cordial wave. In the revolving door, he almost bumped into a new arrival whom Maigret would probably not have seen had he not been staring after the editor.

As he pushed the door, the man spotted Maigret through the glass pane and his expression registered a certain dismay. Ordinarily, he would have greeted Maigret, whom he had known for years. He almost did so, glanced hesitantly at Mascoulin's table and, hoping perhaps that Maigret hadn't had a chance to recognize him, abruptly turned around and vanished.

Mascoulin, from his corner, had missed nothing of the scene, although he remained poker-faced.

What was Maurice Labat doing at the Filet de Sole, and why had he beaten a hasty retreat on seeing Maigret in the restaurant?

For ten years or so he had been part of a department at the Sûreté and there was even a period, admittedly brief, when it was said that he had influence over the minister.

One day, it suddenly emerged that he had handed in his resignation, and subsequently that he had not done so of his own

free will but to avoid more serious trouble.

Since then, he continued to be seen on the fringes of circles that frequented places like the Filet de Sole. He had not, like others in his situation, opened a private detective agency. He had no known profession or source of income. In addition to his wife and children, he had a mistress twenty years younger than him in an apartment in Rue de Ponthieu, whose upkeep must have been quite costly.

The Labat incident gave Maigret food for thought and he was too distracted to savour his sole Dieppoise as it deserved.

Was it not natural to think that the person the former police officer was coming to see at the Filet de Sole was no other than Mascoulin?

Labat was the man, among a thousand, who could be entrusted with certain dubious tasks, and he must still have some friends at Rue des Saussaies.

In making his getaway, had he hoped that Maigret hadn't had time to recognize him? Had Mascoulin, whom Maigret couldn't see at that moment, signalled to him not to come in?

Had Labat been in his forties, plump and smoked a cigar, Maigret would have been convinced that he had just encountered the man who had visited Boulevard Pasteur and Rue Vaneau and who had kidnapped Piquemal.

But Labat was barely thirty-six. He was Corsican and looked typically Mediterranean. Short and wiry, he wore platform-heeled shoes to make himself look taller and had a brown drooping moustache. And he smoked cigarettes from dawn till dusk, attested by his nicotine-stained fingers.

But even so, his appearance pointed Maigret in a new direction and he was annoyed with himself for having been obsessed with the Sûreté.

Labat had formerly been at Rue des Saussaies but was no longer. In Paris, there were a few dozen other former members of the Sûreté, thrown out for similar reasons.

Maigret promised himself to get hold of a list of them later. He needed to telephone Lucas right away and ask him to get on to it. But he didn't, and, strange as it may seem, he was reluctant to walk across the room under Mascoulin's disdainful gaze.

Mascoulin, who hadn't ordered a dessert, was on his coffee. Maigret also skipped dessert but had a coffee and brandy. He started to fill his pipe, picturing the faces he had known at Rue des

Saussaies. A name was on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't remember it.

The minute he had heard mention of a stout man, and especially one who smoked a cigar, it had rung a bell.

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he barely noticed Mascoulin stand up and wipe his mouth on his napkin, then address a few words to his companions. Or to be precise, he saw him rise, push back the table to let himself out, and start walking casually towards him, but it was as if it had nothing at all to do with him.

'May I, inspector?' said Mascoulin, grabbing the back of the chair facing Maigret.

His face was solemn, with merely a quiver at the corner of his mouth, which might simply have been a nervous twitch.

For a second, Maigret was disconcerted. He had not been expecting this. He had never heard Mascoulin's voice, which was deep and honeyed. People said that it was because of his voice that women fought for seats in the Chamber when he was scheduled to speak, even though he had the face of a Grand Inquisitor.

'Strange coincidence that you are here today. I was going to telephone you.'

Maigret remained stone-faced, trying as best he could to make things more difficult for him, but Mascoulin appeared unfazed by his silence.

'I have only just learned that you are dealing with Piquemal and the Calame Report.'

He spoke softly, because of the other diners, and many pairs of eyes were on them.

'Not only do I have important information for you, but I think I should make an official statement. Perhaps later on you would like to send one of your inspectors over to the Chamber to take it down? Anyone will tell him where to find me.'

Maigret still did not bat an eyelid.

'It's about this Piquemal. I happen to have been in touch with him last week.'

Maigret had Mascoulin's letter in his pocket, and he was beginning to understand why the latter felt the need to talk to him.

'I don't know which day it was when my secretary handed me one of the many letters I receive daily and which it is his job to answer. It was signed Piquemal and bore the address of a hotel in Rue Jacob whose name escapes me, the name of a provincial town,

I believe.'

Without taking his eyes off him, Maigret took a sip of coffee and began to puff on his pipe again.

'As you can imagine, I receive several hundred letters every day from all sorts of people, mad, half-mad, honest folk informing me of wrongdoings, and it is the job of my secretary, a young man of excellent character whom I trust completely, to sift them.'

Why did Maigret wonder, as he scrutinized Mascoulin's face, whether he was a homosexual? There had never been any gossip about him to suggest it. If he was, he hid it very carefully. It seemed to Maigret that that would explain certain of his character traits.

'Piquemal's letter sounded sincere and I am sure you will agree if I can lay my hands on it, because I will make it my duty to send it to you. He wrote that he was the only man in Paris who knew the whereabouts of the Calame Report and was in a position to obtain it. He added that he was writing to me rather than to an official body because he knew that it was in too many people's interests to hush up the affair and that I was the only person he completely trusted. Forgive me for repeating his words. I sent him a note, on the off-chance, inviting him to a meeting.'

Maigret calmly took his wallet out of his pocket and extracted the letter on headed notepaper from the Chamber. He contented himself with showing it without holding it out across the table, despite Mascoulin's move to snatch it.

'This note?'

'I imagine so. I think I recognize my handwriting.'

He did not ask how Maigret came to have the letter in his possession, avoided showing the slightest surprise, and said:

'I see you already know. I met him at the Brasserie du Croissant, which is close to the print works and where I hold some of my evening meetings. He seemed a little too fanatical, a little too much of an agitator for my liking. I let him speak.'

'Did he tell you he had the report in his possession?'

'Not exactly. Men like that never do things so simply. They need to create an atmosphere of conspiracy. He told me he worked at the École des Ponts et Chaussées, that he had been assistant to Professor Calame and that he believed he knew the whereabouts of the report written in the past about the Clairfond sanatorium. Our conversation didn't last longer than ten minutes because I had to check the proofs of my article.'

‘Did Piquemal then bring you the report?’

‘I didn’t see him again. He offered to give it to me on the Monday or the Tuesday at the latest. I told him that I did not want the document to pass through my hands, for reasons you will understand. We now have proof that that report is dynamite.’

‘Who did you advise him to give it to?’

‘To his superiors.’

‘In other words, the dean of the École des Ponts et Chaussées?’

‘I don’t think I said so in so many words. Perhaps I mentioned the word ministry, which naturally came to my mind.’

‘He didn’t try to telephone you?’

‘Not that I am aware of.’

‘Or to see you?’

‘If he did, he wasn’t successful because, as I told you, the only news I have had of him is through the press.

‘It would appear that he took my advice, going somewhat further, because he went straight to the minister. As soon as I heard he had disappeared, I promised myself I’d inform you of the incident. That is done. Given the potential repercussions of this affair, I would like my statement to be duly recorded. So if this afternoon …’

There was nothing else to be done. Maigret was forced to send someone over to take down his statement. The inspector, Maigret was certain, would find Mascoulin surrounded by a number of colleagues and journalists. Was this not a way of accusing Auguste Point?

‘Thank you,’ he muttered. ‘I’ll see to it.’

Mascoulin looked slightly miffed, as if he had been expecting something else. Had he imagined that Maigret would ask him awkward questions, or show his disbelief in some way?

‘I’m simply doing my duty. Had I known that events would take this turn, I would have talked to you sooner.’

He seemed to be playing a part all the time, and not even concealing the fact. He appeared to be saying:

‘I’ve outwitted you. Try and counter that!’

Was Maigret wrong? From one point of view, certainly, because he had nothing to gain but everything to lose in confronting as powerful and wily a man as Mascoulin.

The latter, on his feet, was proffering his hand. In a flash, Maigret remembered Point and his ‘dirty hands’ stance.

He didn’t stop to weigh up the pros and the cons but grabbed his

coffee cup, which was empty, and raised it to his lips, ignoring the outstretched hand.

The politician's eyes clouded. The quivering at the corner of his mouth intensified.

He merely said:

'Goodbye, *Monsieur* Maigret.'

Did he intentionally stress the word 'monsieur' as Maigret thought? If so, it was a thinly veiled threat suggesting that Maigret would not enjoy his title of detective chief inspector for much longer.

He followed Mascoulin with his gaze as he returned to his table, leaned towards his companions and shouted mechanically:

'Waiter! The bill, please.'

Ten people at least, who were all leading figures in the life of the country in one way or another, were staring at Maigret.

He must have drunk his glass of brandy without realizing because once outside he noticed the taste in his mouth.

7. Maigret's Taxis

This was not the first time Maigret had made one of his entrances, more as a friend than a boss. He opened the door of the inspectors' office and, pushing back his hat, perched on the corner of a table and emptied his pipe on to the floor, banging it against his heel, then filling another. He looked at them all in turn as they went about their various tasks with the expression of a father returning home in the evening, happy to see his family, counting his children.

Some time went by before he said:

'I bet your photo's going to be in the papers, young Lapointe.'

The latter looked up, trying not to blush, with an expression of faint disbelief. Deep down, apart from Maigret who was used to it, most of them were secretly thrilled when the newspapers published their photograph, even though they pretended to protest:

'With all that publicity, it's not exactly going to be easy to work undercover!'

The others listened too. If Maigret had come to talk to Lapointe in the shared office, it was because what he had to say to him concerned everyone.

'Grab a notebook and go to the Chamber. I'm certain you'll have no difficulty in locating Mascoulin, and I wouldn't be surprised if you found him in distinguished company. He'll make a statement which you'll write down carefully. Then come back here and type it out and leave it on my desk.'

The afternoon newspapers with front-page photographs of Auguste Point and himself were protruding from Maigret's pocket.

He had merely glanced at them. He knew almost exactly what the headlines said.

'Is that all?' asked Lapointe, going over to take his coat and hat from the cupboard.

'For now.'

Maigret remained there smoking, in a reverie.

'Listen, boys …'

The inspectors looked up.

'Try to think of people who have been fired or forced to resign from the Sûreté.'

'Recently?' asked Lucas.

'It doesn't matter when. Let's say in the past ten years.'

Torrence shouted:

'There must be a list!'

'Give me some names.'

'Baudelin. The fellow who carries out investigations for an insurance company.'

Maigret tried to recall Baudelin, a tall, pale young man who had had to leave Rue des Saussaies not for dishonesty or impropriety but because he devoted more energy and cunning to reporting in sick than to doing his job.

'Another.'

'Falconet.'

Over fifty, Falconet had been asked to take early retirement because he had begun drinking and could no longer be relied on.

'Another.'

'Young Valencourt.'

'Too young.'

Contrary to what they had expected at first, they could only come up with a few names and, each time, after visualizing the man, Maigret would shake his head.

'It still doesn't fit. I need a plump man, almost as portly as me.'

'Fischer.'

There was a general outburst of laughter. Fischer weighed at least 120 kilos.

'Thank you!' grunted Maigret.

He stayed with them for a while, then eventually stood up with a sigh.

'Lucas! Will you telephone Rue des Saussaies and get hold of Catroux for me?'

Now that he was dealing solely with inspectors who had left the Sûreté, he no longer felt as if he were asking his friend to betray the department. Catroux, who had been at Rue des Saussaies for twenty years, was better placed than the people in the Police Judiciaire to answer his question.

It was clear that Maigret had a hunch that was still vague and probably didn't entirely stack up. From his feigned air of surliness and his wide-eyed stare that seemed to bore right through people, the men gathered that he at least knew where to look.

He was still racking his brains for the name that had been eluding him earlier. Lucas was telephoning, speaking with familiarity to the person on the other end of the line, who must be a friend of his.

'Catroux isn't there, chief.'

'You're not going to tell me that he's on a case in the far south of France?'

'No. He's ill.'

'In hospital?'

'At home.'

'Did you ask for his address?'

'I thought you knew it.'

They were good friends, he and Catroux, it was true. But they had never been to each other's homes. Maigret only remembered once dropping his colleague off outside his front door, Boulevard des Batignolles, near the top end, on the left, and he remembered there was a restaurant to the right of the door.

'Has the photo of Piquemal been published?'

'On page two.'

'No phone calls about him?'

'Not yet.'

He repaired to his office, opened a few letters without sitting down, took some papers over to Torrence and finally went down into the yard but was loath to use one of the Police Judiciaire's cars. When it came to it, he preferred a taxi. Although his visit to Catroux was perfectly innocuous, he judged it more prudent not to park a vehicle from Quai des Orfèvres outside his front door.

Initially, he plumped for the wrong building, because there were now two restaurants fifty metres apart. He asked the concierge:

'Monsieur Catroux?'

'Second floor on the right. The lift's out of order.'

He rang the bell. He did not remember Madame Catroux, who

opened the door, although she recognized him at once.

'Come in, Monsieur Maigret.'

'Is your husband in bed?'

'No. In his armchair. It's just a nasty bout of flu. He usually catches it at the beginning of the winter. This time it's got him at the end.'

On the walls were portraits of two children, a boy and a girl, at different ages. Both were now married, and photographs of the grandchildren had been added to the gallery.

'Maigret?' inquired Catroux's delighted voice before his friend had reached the door of the room where he was resting.

The vast living room was clearly the heart of the home. Catroux, bundled up in a thick dressing gown, was sitting by the window, newspapers on his knees, more on a chair beside him, a bowl of herbal tea on a pedestal table. He was holding a cigarette.

'Are you allowed to smoke?'

'Shh! Don't you side with my wife. Just a few puffs from time to time, for the taste.'

He was hoarse and his eyes were feverish.

'Take off your coat. It must be very warm in here. My wife insists I should sweat it out. Sit down.'

'Will you have something to drink, Monsieur Maigret?' asked Madame Catroux.

To Maigret's surprise, she was almost an old lady. He and Catroux were around the same age. He had the impression that his own wife looked a lot younger.

'Of course, Isabelle. Don't wait for him to answer, go and get the decanter of vintage Calvados.'

There was an awkward silence between the two men. Catroux knew, of course, that his colleague from the Police Judiciaire hadn't come up to see him to inquire after his health, and he was perhaps expecting questions that were a lot more uncomfortable than those Maigret had in mind.

'Don't worry, my friend. I have no wish to put you in an awkward situation.'

Catroux then glanced at the front page of the newspaper as if to say:

'It's about this, isn't it?'

Maigret waited until Madame Catroux had poured his glass of Calvados.

‘What about me?’ protested his friend.

‘You’re not allowed.’

‘The doctor didn’t say that.’

‘I don’t need him to say so to know.’

‘Just a drop, so that I can pretend?’

She poured him a thimbleful then discreetly left the room, as Madame Maigret would have done.

‘I’ve got an idea in the back of my mind,’ admitted Maigret. ‘Earlier, with my inspectors, we were trying to draw up a list of all the people who once worked with you and were thrown out.’

Catroux was still looking at the newspaper, trying to make a connection between what Maigret was saying and what he had just read.

‘Thrown out, why?’

‘For any reason. You know what I’m talking about. It happens at our place too, less often because there are fewer of us.’

Catroux smiled, teasing.

‘Is that what you think?’

‘And also, perhaps, because we deal with fewer sorts of things. So the temptation isn’t so strong. Earlier, we racked our brains, but we only came up with a few names.’

‘Which ones?’

‘Baudelin, Falconet, Valencourt, Fischer …’

‘Is that all?’

‘Pretty much. I thought it better to come and see you. They’re not the type I’m looking for. It’s those who turned bad.’

‘Like Labat?’

Was it not strange that Catroux should come up with that particular name? It was almost as if he were doing it deliberately to inform Maigret inadvertently.

‘I thought of him. He’s probably mixed up in it. But he’s not the one I’m looking for.’

‘Do you have a name in mind?’

‘A name and a face. I’ve been given a description. It reminded me of someone from the outset. And ever since …’

‘What description? That’ll be quicker than me giving you an entire list. Especially since I don’t have all the names in my mind either.’

‘First of all, people took him for a police officer on sight.’

‘That could apply to a lot of them.’

‘Middle aged. A bit plumper than normal. Slightly less rotund than me.’

Catroux seemed to be assessing Maigret’s girth.

‘Either I’m very much mistaken or he’s still carrying out investigations, either privately or on behalf of certain clients.’

‘A private detective agency?’

‘Perhaps. He doesn’t necessarily have his name on the door of an office, or put ads in the newspapers.’

‘There are several, including former very respectable chiefs who opened up an agency on their retirement. Louis Canonge, for example. And Cadet, who used to be my boss.’

‘We have some of those too. I’m talking about the other category.’

‘Don’t you have a fuller description?’

‘He smokes cigars.’

Immediately, Maigret saw that Catroux was thinking of someone. His brow had furrowed. There was a look of annoyance on his face.

‘Does that ring a bell?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who?’

‘A scoundrel.’

‘It’s a scoundrel I’m looking for.’

‘A petty but dangerous scoundrel.’

‘Why?’

‘Firstly, those bastards are always dangerous. And secondly, he does the dirty work for certain politicians.’

‘That still fits.’

‘Do you think he’s mixed up in your case?’

‘If he matches the description I gave you, smokes cigars and dabbles in politics, the chances are that he’s my man. You don’t mean …’

Suddenly, Maigret could picture a face, a broad face, with puffy eyes, full lips deformed by a cigar butt.

‘Wait! It’s coming back to me. It’s …’

But the name still eluded him.

‘Benoît,’ whispered Catroux. ‘Eugène Benoît. He opened a private detective agency on Boulevard Saint-Martin, above a watchmaker’s. His name is on the window. I think the door’s closed more often than it’s open, because he’s the sole employee.’

That was indeed the name Maigret had been trying to think of for the past twenty-four hours.

‘I don’t suppose it would be easy to get hold of his photograph?’

Catroux thought about it.

‘That depends on the exact date he left the department. It was …’

He made some calculations under his breath and called out:

‘Isabelle!’

His wife, who was not far away, scuttled in.

‘Look on the bottom shelf of the bookcase for a directory of the Sûreté. There’s only one, which dates from a few years ago. It contains two or three hundred photos.’

She brought it to him and he leafed through it, pointed out his own portrait, and only found what he was looking for on one of the last pages.

‘Here! This is him. He’s a few years older, but he hasn’t changed much. As for his girth, I’ve always known him fat.’

Maigret recognized him too, because he had met him in the past.

‘You don’t mind if I cut out his photo?’

‘Go ahead. Bring some scissors, Isabelle.’

Maigret slid the square of glossy paper into his wallet and rose.

‘In a hurry?’

‘Yes, somewhat. Besides, I imagine you’d rather I didn’t say too much about this business.’

Catroux understood. So long as Maigret wasn’t aware of the precise role played by the Sûreté, it was better for Catroux if his colleague told him as little as possible.

‘Aren’t you afraid?’

‘Not really.’

‘Do you think that Point …?’

‘I’m convinced he’s being used as a scapegoat.’

‘Another drink?’

‘No, thank you. Get well soon.’

Madame Catroux showed him to the door and, once outside, he took another taxi to Rue Vaneau. It was a shot in the dark. He knocked at the concierge’s lodge. She recognized him.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you again. I’d like you to take a close look at a photograph and tell me if this is the man who went up to Mademoiselle Blanche’s apartment. Take your time.’

There was no need. Without hesitation, she shook her head.

‘Absolutely not.’

‘Are you certain?’

‘Positive.’

‘Even if the photo was taken a few years ago and the man has changed since?’

‘Even if he were wearing a false beard, I’d state that it wasn’t him.’

He gave her a sidelong look, because it flashed into his mind that this was perhaps an answer she had been told to give. But no! He could tell she was speaking the truth.

‘Thank you,’ he sighed, putting his wallet back in his pocket.

That was a blow. He had been almost certain that he was on the right track, but his theory was falling apart right from the start.

His taxi was waiting and he told the driver to take him to Rue Jacob, because it was the closest. He went into the café where Piquemal was in the habit of having his breakfast. At this hour, the place was almost deserted.

‘Would you have a look at this photo?’

He hardly dared watch the owner, so apprehensive was he of his reply.

‘That’s him all right. Except he seemed a bit older to me.’

‘That’s the man who accosted Monsieur Piquemal and left here with him?’

‘That’s him.’

‘You’re absolutely certain?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Aren’t you having a drink?’

‘Not now, thank you. I’ll be back.’

This testimony changed everything. So far, Maigret had assumed that the same individual had visited the various places – Mademoiselle Blanche’s apartment, Piquemal’s little café, the Hôtel du Berry, the professor’s widow and Boulevard Pasteur.

Now he realized there were at least two men.

Next he paid a call to Madame Calame, whom he found reading the newspapers.

‘I hope you’re going to find my husband’s report. Now I understand why he was so tormented during his final years. I’ve always had a horror of filthy politics!’

She eyed him warily, telling herself that it was perhaps in the name of ‘filthy politics’ that Maigret was coming to see her.

‘What do you want this time?’

He held out the photograph.

She studied it carefully and looked up, surprised.

'Should I be able to recognize him?'

'Not necessarily. I wondered whether it was the man who came to see you two or three days after Piquemal's visit.'

'I've never seen him.'

'No possibility of a mistake?'

'None. He might be the same type of man, but I'm certain he's not the one who came here.'

'Thank you.'

'What's happened to Piquemal? Do you think they've killed him?'

'Why?'

'I don't know. If they want to hush up my husband's report at all costs, they'll have to do away with all those who are acquainted with it.'

'They didn't do away with your husband.'

His reply disconcerted her. She felt she had to protect Calame's memory.

'My husband knew nothing about politics. He was a scientist. He did his duty by writing his report and delivering it to the authorities.'

'I am sure he did his duty.'

He decided to leave before she obliged him to discuss the matter in more detail. The taxi-driver shot him an inquiring look.

'Where now?'

'To the Hôtel du Berry.'

He found two journalists there trying to find out about Piquemal. They hurried over towards Maigret, but he shook his head.

'Nothing to tell you, boys. Just a routine check. I promise you that—'

'Are you hoping to find Piquemal alive?'

Them as well!

He left them in the corridor while he showed the photo to the owner.

'What do you want me to do with this?'

'Tell me if that's the man who came to talk to you about Piquemal.'

'Which one?'

'Not my inspector, who rented a room, but the other one.'

'No.'

He was categorical. So far, it seemed that Benoît was the

character who had left the little café with Piquemal, but he wasn't the one who had made any of the other visits.

'Thank you.'

He jumped into the car.

'Keep driving …'

Only once they were on the move, well out of earshot of the journalists, did he give the address on Boulevard Pasteur. He didn't knock on the concierge's door but went straight up to the third floor. There was no answer when he rang the electric bell and he had to go back downstairs.

'Is Madame Gaudry not at home?'

'She went out half an hour ago with her little boy.'

'You don't know when she'll be back?'

'She wasn't wearing her hat. She's probably gone to the local shops. She won't be long.'

Rather than wait in the street, he went into the bar where he had gone that morning and called the Police Judiciaire on the off-chance. It was Lucas who picked up the phone in the inspectors' office.

'Nothing new?'

'Two phone calls about Piquemal. The first from a taxi-driver who claims to have driven him to Gare du Nord yesterday. The other from a cinema cashier who says she sold him a ticket last night. I had them checked.'

'Is Lapointe back?'

'He came in a few minutes ago. He hasn't started typing yet.'

'Put him on, please.'

And, to Lapointe:

'Well? The photographers?'

'They were there, chief, and they kept on snapping us while Mascoulin was speaking.'

'Where did he see you?'

'In the Salle des Colonnes. In other words, it was like the concourse of Gare Saint-Lazare! The ushers had to move the crowd so we could breathe.'

'Was his private secretary with him?'

'I don't know. I've never seen him. I wasn't even introduced to him.'

'Is it long?'

'It'll be around three typewritten pages. Some journalists took it

down at the same time as I did.'

That meant that Mascoulin's statement would appear that evening in the late edition of the newspapers.

'He told me to bring it to him for signing.'

'What did you reply?'

'That it was none of my business and that I'd wait for your orders.'

'Do you know whether there's a late-night session in the Chamber?'

'I don't think so. I heard that they'd finish at around five p.m.'

'Type out your report and wait till I get there.'

Madame Gaudry had not returned yet. He paced up and down on the pavement and saw her coming back carrying a bag of groceries, her son trotting beside her. She recognized him.

'Is it me you want to see?'

'Just for a moment.'

'Come on up, I was doing my shopping.'

'It's probably not worth my while.'

The boy tugged her arm, asking:

'Who's he? Why does he want to talk to you?'

'Be a good boy. He just wants to ask me something.'

'What does he want to ask?'

Maigret had taken the photo out of his pocket.

'Have you ever seen this man?'

She wriggled free and leaned over the scrap of glossy paper, then said spontaneously:

'Yes, that's him.'

So now Eugène Benoît, the man with the cigar, had been identified in two places: Boulevard Pasteur, where he had probably stolen the Calame Report, and the café in Rue Jacob, where he had accosted Piquemal and had been seen going with him in the opposite direction from the École des Ponts et Chaussées.

'Have you found him?' asked Madame Gaudry.

'Not yet. It won't be long, I'm sure.'

He hailed another taxi to take him to Boulevard Saint-Martin, wishing he had taken a Police Judiciaire car, because once again he would have to argue over his expenses with the accounts department.

The building was old. The bottom windows were of frosted glass and in black letters were the words:

The Benoît Agency
All types of detective work

On either side of the arch, name plates announced a dentist, an artificial flower business, a Swedish masseuse and a range of other professions, some of them fairly unusual. The staircase on the left was gloomy and dusty. Benoît's name was there again, on an enamel door plate.

He knocked, knowing in advance that no one would reply, because there were leaflets poking out from under the door. After waiting for a moment out of duty, he went back down and eventually found the concierge's lodge at the end of the courtyard. There was no concierge but a shoemaker, with the lodge doubling up as his little shop.

'How long is it since you've seen Monsieur Benoît?'

'I haven't seen him today, if that's what you want to know.'

'What about yesterday?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. I didn't notice.'

'And the day before yesterday?'

'Not the day before yesterday either.'

He didn't seem to care, and Maigret thrust his badge under his nose.

'I've told you what I know. No offence meant. The residents' doings are none of my business.'

'Do you know his private address?'

'It must be in the book.'

He got up reluctantly, ambled over to a kitchen dresser and fished out a grimy register whose pages he flicked through with his tarry hands.

'The last one I have is on Boulevard Beaumarchais.'

It wasn't far away. Maigret went there on foot.

'He moved out three weeks ago,' he was told. 'He only stayed here two months.'

This time he was sent to a rather seedy furnished lodging house on Rue Saint-Denis in front of which stood an enormous girl who opened her mouth to speak to him, but must have recognized him at the last moment and gave a shrug.

'He's got room 19. He's not in.'

'Did he spend last night there?'

'Emma! Did you do Monsieur Benoît's room this morning?'

A head appeared over the banister on the first floor.

‘Who’s asking for him?’

‘Never you mind. Answer.’

‘No. He didn’t sleep here.’

‘What about the night before?’

‘Neither.’

Maigret asked for the key to the room. The girl who had replied from the stairs followed him up to the third floor on the pretence of showing him the way. The doors were numbered, he didn’t need her. All the same, he asked her a few questions:

‘Does he live alone?’

‘You want to know whether he sleeps alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fairly often.’

‘Does he have a regular lady friend?’

‘He has lots.’

‘What sort?’

‘The sort who’s prepared to come here.’

‘Often the same?’

‘I’ve already seen the same face two or three times.’

‘Does he pick them up in the street?’

‘I’m not there when he chooses them.’

‘So he hasn’t set foot in the hotel for two days?’

‘Two or three. I’m not exactly sure.’

‘Does he sometimes entertain men?’

‘If I get your drift, he doesn’t go in for that sort of thing, and nor does this establishment. There’s a hotel for those people at the bottom of the street.’

Maigret didn’t learn much from the room. It was typical of that kind of hotel, with its iron bedstead, old chest of drawers, sagging armchair and washbasin with running hot and cold water. The drawers contained underwear, an opened box of cigars, a watch that had stopped and different sized fish hooks in a cellophane packet, but not a single interesting document. In an extendable suitcase he found only shoes and dirty shirts.

‘Does he sometimes not come back to sleep here?’

‘Quite often. And, every Saturday, he goes away to the country until Monday.’

This time, Maigret had the taxi drive him back to Quai des Orfèvres, where Lapointe had long since finished typing up Mascoulin’s statement.

‘Telephone the Chamber and find out whether the deputies are still there.’

‘Should I say you want to speak to him?’

‘No. Don’t mention me or the Police Judiciaire.’

When he turned to Lucas, the latter shook his head.

‘There was another phone call after the first two. We checked. Torrence is still on the way. Red herrings.’

‘It wasn’t Piquemal?’

‘No. The taxi-driver was the most certain, but we found his customer in the building where he picked him up.’

There would be more, especially in the following day’s post.

‘The session in the Chamber ended half an hour ago,’ announced Lapointe. ‘They just had to vote on—’

‘I don’t care what they were voting on.’

He knew that Mascoulin lived in Rue d’Antin, a stone’s throw from the Opéra.

‘Are you doing anything?’

‘Nothing important.’

‘In that case, come with me and bring the statement.’

Maigret never drove. He had tried, at the time when the Police Judiciaire had the use of a number of little black cars, but on several occasions, lost in thought, he had forgotten that he was at the wheel and only remembered to brake at the last minute, so he preferred not to drive.

‘Shall we take the car?’

‘Yes.’

It was almost as if to redeem himself for all the taxis he had taken that afternoon.

‘Do you know what number Rue d’Antin?’

‘No. It’s the oldest building.’

The apartment block was respectable, old-fashioned but well maintained. Maigret and Lapointe pulled up in front of the concierge’s lodge, which resembled a petty bourgeois sitting room and smelled of floor polish and velvet.

‘Monsieur Mascoulin.’

‘Do you have an appointment?’

Maigret ventured a ‘yes’. At the same time, the woman in black looked at him, then glanced at the front page of the newspaper and back at him.

‘I suppose I should let you go up, Monsieur Maigret. It’s the first

floor on the left.'

'How long has he lived here?'

'It'll be eleven years in December.'

'Does his secretary live with him?'

She gave a little laugh.

'Most certainly not.'

He felt as if she had read his thoughts.

'Do they work late into the evening?'

'Often. Nearly always. I think Monsieur Mascoulin is one of the busiest men in Paris. Simply answering all the letters he receives here and at the Chamber.'

Maigret was tempted to show her the photograph of Benoît and ask her whether she had ever seen him, but she would probably mention it to Mascoulin and Maigret preferred not to reveal anything.

'Do you have a private telephone line to his apartment?'

'How do you know?'

It wasn't difficult to guess, because as well as the normal telephone, there was a lighter one on the wall. Mascoulin was cautious.

So she would alert him to the arrival of Maigret as soon as he and Lapointe were on their way upstairs. It did not matter. He could have prevented her by leaving Lapointe in the lodge.

There was no immediate reply when he rang the bell and, after a while, it was Mascoulin himself who came and opened the door, without bothering to feign surprise.

'I thought you would show up in person and that you would choose to come here. Follow me.'

The hall floor was cluttered with piles of newspapers, magazines and reports of parliamentary debates. There were more in what served as the sitting room, which was barely more welcoming than a dentist's waiting room.

Mascoulin clearly was not interested in either luxury or comfort.

'I suppose you'd like to see my study?'

There was something insulting in his irony, in his way of appearing to guess Maigret's intentions, but the latter remained composed.

He merely retorted:

'I'm not a female admirer who has come to ask for your autograph.'

‘This way.’

They went through a double padded door that led into a spacious study with both windows overlooking the street. Two of the walls were lined with green files. Elsewhere were rows of law manuals like those found in every lawyer’s office, and lastly, on the floor again, newspapers and as many reports as in a ministry.

‘May I introduce René Falk, my secretary?’

The young man could not have been more than twenty-five; he was fair-haired and puny, with a curiously childlike peevish expression.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ he mumbled, glaring at Maigret in the same way as Mademoiselle Blanche had done the first time.

Like her, he must be fanatically devoted to his boss and consider any stranger as an enemy.

‘Do you have the statement? Several copies of it, I imagine?’

‘Three copies, two of which I require you to sign, as you stated you would, the third for your record or for whatever else you wish to do with it.’

Mascoulin took the documents and held one out to René Falk, who began to read at the same time as he did.

Sitting at his desk, he picked up a pen, added the occasional comma and crossed out a word, muttering to Lapointe:

‘I hope you’re not offended?’

When he reached the last line, he signed, and he made the same corrections on the second copy, which he also signed.

Maigret reached out, but Mascoulin did not hand him the documents. Nor did he make the corrections on the third copy.

‘Correct?’ he asked his secretary.

‘I think so, yes.’

‘Put them through the machine.’

He shot Maigret a mocking look.

‘A man who has as many enemies as I do can’t be too careful,’ he said. ‘Especially when it is in so many people’s interest that a certain document does not come to light.’

Falk pushed open a door which he did not close behind him, revealing a narrow room, a former kitchen or bathroom where, on a white wood table, stood a Photostat machine.

The secretary pressed buttons. The machine made a gentle humming sound and he inserted the sheets of paper one at a time, as well as other sheets of a special paper. Maigret was familiar with

the system but had rarely seen a machine of that kind in a private home. He watched the operation with seeming indifference.

'A wonderful invention, isn't it?' said Mascoulin with his nasty sardonic grin. 'People have no qualms about disputing a carbon copy, but it is impossible to deny a Photostat.'

A vague smile lit up Maigret's face, which did not escape Mascoulin.

'What are you thinking about?'

'I was wondering whether, among the people who have recently had the Calame Report in their hands, there was anyone who had the idea of Photostatting it.'

It was not by inadvertence that Mascoulin had allowed him to see the machine. Falk could have disappeared for a moment with the documents without Maigret having any idea what he was up to in the adjacent room.

The damp sheets emerged from a slit and the secretary spread them out to dry on the table.

'It would be a good trick to play on those who are so keen to hush up the affair, wouldn't it?' sniggered Mascoulin.

Maigret gazed at him in silence, giving him his most impassive and at the same time ponderous look.

'A good trick, yes,' he echoed.

No one would have guessed that the thought sent shivers down his spine.

8. The Trip to Seineport

When they arrived at Boulevard Saint-Germain, it was half past six and the ministry courtyard was deserted. As Maigret and Lapointe headed towards the staircase that led up to the minister's office, a voice behind them called:

'Hey! You two … Where are you going?'

The security guard hadn't seen them stride past. They froze, facing him, in the middle of the courtyard, and he hobbled over to them, glanced at the badge Maigret flashed and then at his face.

'My apologies. I saw your photo earlier.'

'You did the right thing. But since you're here, tell me …'

It was becoming a habit to take the photo from his wallet.

'Have you ever seen this man?'

The porter, anxious not to make another blunder, put on a pair of steel-rimmed glasses with thick lenses then studied it closely. He said neither yes nor no but gave the impression that, before committing himself, he wanted to ask what it was all about but didn't dare.

'He's a bit older now, isn't he?'

'A few years.'

'Does he have a two-seater car, black, a vintage model?'

'It's possible.'

'Then he's probably the man I caught parking his car in the courtyard in the space reserved for ministry vehicles.'

'When?'

'I don't remember the day. Around the beginning of the week.'

‘Didn’t he give his name?’

‘He shrugged and went and parked the car on the other side of the courtyard.’

‘Did he go up the main staircase?’

‘Yes.’

‘While we’re up there, try to remember the day.’

In the first-floor waiting room, the clerk was still at his desk, reading the newspapers. Maigret showed him the photograph too. He shook his head.

‘When would he have come?’ he asked.

‘Around the beginning of the week.’

‘I wasn’t here. I had to take four days’ leave because of my wife’s death. You’ll have to ask Joseph. He’ll be here next week. Shall I inform the minister that you’re here?’

A moment later, Auguste Point opened the door to his office in person. He looked tired but calm. He showed Maigret and Lapointe in without asking any questions. Mademoiselle Blanche and his principal private secretary were both in the room. Radios couldn’t yet be standard ministry equipment because on a pedestal table there was a small portable radio, probably belonging to Point, which the three of them must have been listening to when the clerk had interrupted them.

‘… *The session was brief, exclusively devoted to current matters, but the corridors were buzzing all afternoon. All sorts of rumours were going around. There is talk of a sensational arrest on Monday, but it is still not known …*’

‘Turn it off!’ Point said to his secretary.

Fleury made for one of the doors, but Maigret stopped him.

‘You are not in the way, Monsieur Fleury. Neither are you, mademoiselle.’

Point watched him, anxious, because it was difficult to guess what Maigret had come to do. What was more, he seemed like a man who was following his instinct, so intent on it that he was oblivious to everything else.

He appeared to be making a mental map of the office. He looked at the walls, the doors.

‘Would you permit me, minister, to ask your staff a couple of questions?’

He turned to Fleury first.

‘I assume that during Piquemal’s visit, you were in your office?’

‘I was not aware that—’

‘Fine. But now you know. Where were you at that time?’

He pointed to a double door that stood ajar.

‘Is that your office?’

‘Yes.’

Maigret went over to have a quick look around.

‘Were you alone?’

‘I really couldn’t say. I’m rarely alone for long. There’s a steady stream of visitors all day. The minister sees some of them, the most important people, and I deal with the others.’

Maigret went over and opened a door that led directly from the waiting room into Fleury’s office.

‘Do they come through this door?’

‘Usually. Apart from those the minister has seen first and brings into my office for some reason.’

The telephone rang. Point and Mademoiselle Blanche exchanged glances. Mademoiselle Blanche picked up the receiver.

‘No. The minister is not here …’

She listened, with a fixed gaze. She too looked exhausted.

‘The same thing?’ asked Point when she had hung up.

She blinked a yes.

‘He says that his son was—’

‘That’s enough.’

He turned to Maigret.

‘The telephone’s been ringing non-stop since midday. I took a few of the calls myself. Most of them are saying the same thing: “If you continue to hush up the Clairfond affair, we’ll get you!”

‘There are variations. Some are more polite. Some even give their name and they are the parents of the children killed in the disaster. One woman shouted emotionally: “You’re not going to protect the murderers, are you! If you haven’t destroyed the report, show it, so that the whole of France knows …” ’

He had dark rings around his eyes and the sallow complexion of someone deprived of sleep.

‘The chairman of my electoral committee in La Roche-sur-Yon, a man who is a friend of my father’s and who has known me since I was in short trousers, called me earlier, almost immediately after my statement was broadcast on the radio. He didn’t accuse me, but I could tell he had doubts.

‘ “The people around here don’t understand, my boy,” he said

sadly. “They knew your parents and they think they know you. Even if it means bringing them all down, you must speak out and tell what you know.” ’

‘You will do so soon,’ replied Maigret.

Point looked up abruptly, not certain he had heard correctly, and asked incredulously:

‘Do you really think so?’

‘Now I am certain.’

Fleury was leaning against a table at the other end of the office. Maigret held out the photograph of Benoît. Point stared at it, baffled.

‘Who is that?’

‘Don’t you know him?’

‘I don’t recognize his face.’

‘Hasn’t he been to see you recently?’

‘If he has, his name will be in the register in the waiting room.’

‘Would you show me your office, Mademoiselle Blanche?’

Fleury, on the other side of the room, had not been able to see the photograph and Maigret noticed that he was biting his nails, a childhood habit he had clearly not managed to shed.

The single door to the secretary’s office was right next to that of the principal private secretary.

‘Is this where you came when Piquemal arrived and your boss asked you to leave them alone together?’

Tense, she nodded.

‘Did you shut the door behind you?’

Another nod.

‘Could you hear what was being said on the other side?’

‘If I’d pressed my ear to the door and if they’d been speaking loudly enough, I might have done.’

‘But you didn’t do so?’

‘No.’

‘You never do that?’

She chose not to answer. Did she eavesdrop, for example, when Point received a woman she considered pretty or a threat?

‘Do you know this man?’

That was what she had been expecting, because she had managed to steal a glance at the photo when the minister was looking at it.

‘Yes.’

‘Where have you seen him?’

She spoke softly, so that the others couldn't hear.

'In the office next door.'

She pointed at the partition between her office and Fleury's.

'When?'

'On the day of Piquemal's visit.'

'After?'

'No. Before.'

'Was he sitting down, standing?'

'Sitting, with his hat on his head and a cigar in his mouth. I didn't like the way he looked at me.'

'You haven't seen him since?'

'Yes. After.'

'You mean he was still there when Piquemal left, that he was in the next-door office for the duration of the visit?'

'I suppose so. He was there before and after. Do you think that …?'

She probably wanted to talk to him about Fleury, but he merely said:

'Sssh! … Come …'

When he stepped back into the main office, Point gazed at him reproachfully, as if he were annoyed with Maigret for harassing his secretary.

'Do you need your principal private secretary this evening, minister?'

'No … Why …?'

'Because I'd like to interview him.'

'Here?'

'In my office, preferably. Would you mind coming with us, Monsieur Fleury?'

'I have a dinner arrangement, but if it is essential—'

'Call and cancel.'

Fleury did so. Leaving his office door open, he called Fouquet's.

'Bob? Fleury here. Has Jacqueline arrived? … Not yet? … Are you certain? … When she gets there, would you tell her to start eating without me? … Yes … I probably won't be dining … Later, yes … See you later …'

Lapointe watched him out of the corner of his eye. Point, bemused, was gazing at Maigret, visibly wanting to ask him for an explanation. Maigret appeared not to notice.

'Are you doing anything this evening, minister?'

‘I was supposed to be guest of honour at a dinner, but I cancelled before they asked me not to attend.’

‘I may telephone you to give you some news, probably quite late.’

‘Even if it’s in the middle of the night …’

Fleury had reappeared, holding his hat and coat, looking like a man who is only able to stand on his two feet through force of habit.

‘Are you ready? Are you coming, Lapointe?’

The three of them descended the main staircase in silence and headed for the car, which they had parked by the kerb.

‘Get in … Quai des Orfèvres, please, Lapointe …’

They did not exchange a word during the journey. Fleury opened his mouth a couple of times but did not ask any questions and kept biting his nails.

Maigret made him walk ahead of him up the dusty staircase, then led the way into his office, where he went to close the window.

‘You may take off your overcoat. Make yourself comfortable.’

He signalled to Lapointe, who joined him outside in the corridor.

‘Stay with him until I get back. It will be quite a while. You may be here late into the night.’

Lapointe turned red.

‘Are you meeting a young lady?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Can you telephone?’

‘Yes.’

‘If she wants to come and keep you company …’

Lapointe shook his head.

‘Have some sandwiches and coffee brought up from the brasserie. Don’t take your eyes off Fleury. Stop him from making any telephone calls. If he asks you questions, you don’t know anything. I want him to stew in his own juice, do you understand?’

It was the classic treatment. Even though Lapointe had been involved in most of the investigation, he couldn’t see what his chief was leading up to.

‘Go and stay with him. Don’t forget the sandwiches.’

He went into the inspectors’ office and found Janvier, who hadn’t yet left for the day.

‘Are you doing anything special this evening?’

‘No. My wife—’

‘Is expecting you? Can you telephone her?’

He sat on one of the tables and picked up another handset, and requested Catroux's number.

'Maigret here … Forgive me for disturbing you again … Something came back to me earlier, thanks to some fish hooks I came across … One of the times I met Benoît, it was a Saturday, at Gare de Lyon, and he was off fishing … What's that? … He's a keen angler? … You don't know where he normally goes fishing? …'

Maigret, now sure of himself, was convinced he was on the right track and felt as though nothing could stop him.

'… What? … A shack somewhere? … You don't have a way of finding out where? … Yes … Right away … I'll stay by the phone …'

Janvier was still speaking to his wife, asking for news of each of the children, who then came to say good night one after the other.

'Good night, Pierrot … Sleep well … Yes, I'll be there when you wake up … Is that you, Monique? Has your little brother been a good boy? …'

Maigret waited with a sigh. When Janvier hung up, he muttered:

'We may have a very busy night. That makes me think I'd better telephone my wife too.'

'Shall I ask the operator to put you through?'

'I'm waiting for an important call first.'

Catroux was telephoning a colleague, an angler himself, who had sometimes gone fishing with Benoît by the river.

Now it was a matter of luck. The colleague might not be at home. He might be on a case far from Paris. The silence in the office lasted a good ten minutes and Maigret eventually sighed:

'I'm thirsty!'

Just then, the phone rang.

'Catroux?'

'Yes. Do you know Seineport?'

'Just beyond Corbeil, near a lock?'

Maigret remembered a case, once …

'That's right. A little village by the Seine, frequented mainly by anglers. Benoît has a shack not far from the village, a tumbledown former gamekeeper's lodge which he bought for a song around ten years ago.'

'I'll find it.'

'Good luck!'

He did not forget to call his wife, but, unlike Janvier, he didn't

have children to come and wish him good night over the phone.

'Are you coming?'

As he walked past, he half-opened the door to his office. Lapointe had switched on the lamp with the green shade and was ensconced in Maigret's chair. He was reading the newspaper while Fleury sat with his legs crossed, stony-faced, his eyes half-closed.

'See you later, kid.'

The principal private secretary gave a start and rose to ask a question, but Maigret had already shut the door again.

'Are we taking the car?'

'Yes. We're going to Seineport, around thirty kilometres away.'

'I went there once before with you.'

'That's right. Are you hungry?'

'If we have to stay there for a long time …'

'Stop at the Brasserie Dauphine.'

The waiter was surprised when they walked in.

'So I don't have to take the sandwiches and beer that Monsieur Lapointe ordered up to your office?'

'Yes, you do. But first, give us something to drink. What are you having, Janvier?'

'I don't know.'

'Pernod?'

That suited Maigret and Janvier knew it, and he ordered one too.

'Make us two hearty sandwiches each.'

'What kind?'

'Anything. Pâté, if you have any.'

Maigret appeared to be the calmest man on earth.

'We are too used to criminal cases,' he muttered to himself, glass in hand.

He didn't need a response. He added mentally:

'In a criminal case, there's usually only one culprit, or a group of culprits acting in unison. In politics, it's different and the proof is that there are so many parties in the Chamber.'

He found this idea amusing.

'A lot of people have an interest in the Calame Report, for different reasons. Not only the politicians who would be put in a difficult position if the report were published. Not only Arthur Nicoud. There are also those for whom possession of the report would be an asset, and those for whom it would mean power.'

Customers were few and far between that evening. The lamps

were lit, the atmosphere as heavy as before a storm.

They ate their sandwiches at Maigret's usual table and that made him think of Mascoulin's table at the Filet de Sole. They both had their own tables, in different places, and moved in circles that were even more different.

'Coffee?'

'Please.'

'Brandy?'

'No. I'm driving.'

Maigret didn't have one either and, a little later, they left Paris via the Porte d'Italie and took the Fontainebleau road.

'It's funny to think that if Benoît had smoked a pipe instead of those smelly cigars, our task would have been a great deal harder.'

They drove through the suburbs. Then there was nothing but tall trees on either side, cars with their headlights on driving in both directions. Many of them overtook the little black car.

'I assume I don't need to go fast?'

'There's no point. Either they're there or …'

He knew men like Benoît well enough to be able to put himself in their shoes. Benoît did not have much imagination. He was just a small-time swindler whose little fiddles had by no means made him a fortune.

He needed women, any women, and a debauched life in places where he could throw his weight around and act the tough guy, with a couple of days' fishing every week-end.

'I think I recall a little café in Seineport village square. Stop there and we'll ask for information.'

They crossed the Seine at Corbeil, took a road that ran parallel to the river and was fringed with woods on the opposite side. Four or five times, Janvier swerved sharply to avoid rabbits, grumbling each time:

'Off you scamper, stupid!'

From time to time a light punctuated the darkness; finally, there was an entire cluster, a few lamp posts, and the car pulled up outside a café where men were playing cards.

'Shall I come in too?'

'If you feel like a drink.'

'Not now.'

But Maigret, at the bar, downed a glass of spirits.

'Do you know Benoît?'

‘The one who’s from the police?’

Benoît hadn’t thought it necessary to inform people in Seineport that he was no longer a member of the Sûreté after so many years.

‘Do you know where he lives?’

‘Have you come from Corbeil?’

‘Yes.’

‘You drove past his house. Didn’t you notice a quarry, about one and a half kilometres from here?’

‘No.’

‘You can’t see it at night. His house is just opposite, on the other side of the road. If he’s there, you’ll see the light.’

‘Thank you.’

‘He’s there!’ said one of the belote players.

‘How do you know?’

‘Because yesterday I served him a leg of lamb.’

‘A leg of lamb all for him?’

‘He seems to be looking after himself.’

A few minutes later, Janvier, driving at a crawl, pointed to a lighter patch in the woods.

‘That must be the quarry.’

Maigret glanced at the opposite side of the road and a hundred metres further on, beside the river, he spotted a lit window.

‘We’ll leave the car here. Come on.’

Although there was no moon, they found an overgrown path.

9. The Night at the Ministry

They walked soundlessly, in single file so they could not be heard approaching from inside the house. This stretch of the bank must once have belonged to a large estate and the shack would have been a gamekeeper's lodge.

The surrounding land was neglected. A fence that had collapsed in several places enclosed what had been a vegetable garden. Through the lighted window, Maigret and Janvier glimpsed the ceiling beams, whitewashed walls and a table at which two men were seated, playing cards.

Janvier looked at Maigret in the dark, as if to ask him what they were going to do.

'Wait here,' whispered Maigret.

Meanwhile, he walked up to the door, which was locked. He rapped hard.

'What is it?' said a voice inside.

'Open up, Benoît.'

There was a silence, the sound of footsteps. Janvier, at the window, could see the former police officer standing by the table, unsure what to do, then shoving his companion into an adjacent room.

'Who is it?' asked Benoît, going over to the door.

'Maigret.'

Another silence. Finally, the bolt was drawn back and the door opened. Benoît gazed at Maigret's shape in stupefaction.

'What do you want of me?'

‘To have a little chat. You can come in, Janvier.’

The cards were still on the table.

‘Alone?’

Benoît did not answer straight away, having guessed that Janvier had been watching through the window.

‘Perhaps you were playing solitaire?’

Pointing to a door, Janvier said:

‘The other one’s in there, chief.’

‘I’m sure he is. Go and get him.’

Piquemal would have had a job escaping because the door opened into a pantry with no access to the outside.

‘What do you want of me? Have you got a warrant?’ asked Benoît, trying to recover his composure.

‘No.’

‘In that case—’

‘In that case, nothing! Sit down. You too, Piquemal. I hate talking to people who are standing up.’

He fiddled with a few cards.

‘Were you teaching him belote for two players?’

It was very likely. Piquemal had probably never touched a card in his life.

‘Are you going to sit down, Benoît?’

‘I have nothing to say.’

‘Right. In that case, I’ll do the talking.’

There was a bottle of wine on the table, and a single glass. Piquemal, who didn’t play cards, didn’t drink either, and didn’t smoke. Had he ever slept with a woman? Maybe not. He had a wild look in his eye, like a cornered animal.

‘How long have you been working for Mascoulin?’

In these surroundings, Benoît looked less out of place than in Paris, perhaps because he was more at home. He had remained a country fellow; he must have been the local braggart and made the mistake of leaving his village to try his luck in Paris. His cunning and deceit were the cunning and deceit of a farmer at the fair.

He poured himself a drink to boost his confidence, saying sarkily:

‘Should I offer you one?’

‘No, thank you. Mascoulin needs people like you, if only to check the information he receives from all sides.’

‘Keep talking.’

‘When he received Piquemal’s letter, he realized that it was the

best opportunity of his career and that if he played his cards right, he had every chance of having a large section of the political class at his mercy.'

'So you say.'

'So I say!'

Maigret was still on his feet. His hands behind his back, pipe between his teeth, he paced between the door and the fireplace, pausing from time to time in front of one of the two men, while Janvier, perched on the corner of the table, listened attentively.

'What bothered me the most was that, having seen Piquemal and being in a position to obtain the report, he sent him to the minister of public works.'

Benoît smiled pompously.

'It all fell into place earlier when I saw a Photostat machine at Mascoulin's place. Shall we go over the events chronologically, Benoît? You can stop me if I'm wrong.

'Mascoulin receives Piquemal's letter. Being cautious, he calls you in and asks you to check it out. You realize that it is important, that the man is indeed well placed to get hold of the Calame Report.

'At that point, you tell Mascoulin that you know someone in public works, the principal private secretary. Where did you meet him?'

'That's none of your business.'

'It doesn't matter. He's waiting for us in my office and we'll sort out the details later. Fleury is a sad case, always short of money. Except that he has access to circles where a lowlife like you sees the door slammed in his face. I suspect that in exchange for a small fee, he passed you inside information on some of his friends.'

'Keep going.'

'Now, try to understand. If Mascoulin receives the report from Piquemal, he is almost obliged to make it public and unleash a furore, because Piquemal is a man of integrity in his way, a fanatic who would have to be killed to be silenced.

'Granted, producing the report in the Chamber would make Mascoulin shine for a while.

'But that is much less alluring than holding on to it and having something on all those compromised by it.

'It took me a while to think of it. I am not depraved enough to put myself in his shoes.

'Piquemal, then, pays a visit to Madame Calame, where he knows

there is a copy of the report from having seen it there in the past. He slips it into his briefcase and races over to Mascoulin, in Rue d'Antin.

'Once he's there, you no longer need to follow him because you know what will happen next, and you head over to the Ministry of Public Works, where Fleury takes you into his office.

'Mascoulin detains Piquemal on some pretext or another, while his secretary coolly Photostats the report.

'With all the appearance of trustworthiness, he then sends his visitor to hand the report to the appropriate authority, in other words the minister.

'That's right, isn't it?'

Hunched up, in the grip of a violent emotion, Piquemal stared intently at Maigret.

'You are there, in Fleury's office, when Piquemal hands over the document. All you need to know, through Fleury, is where and when it will be easiest for you to steal it.

'Thus the Calame Report will have been made public thanks to the upstanding Mascoulin.

'But, thanks to you, Auguste Point, the minister in question, will not be able to present it to the Chamber.

'So there will be only one hero in the affair: Mascoulin.

'There will be a villain, accused of having destroyed the document to save his skin and that of his compromised colleagues: a certain Auguste Point. His misfortune is to be a man of integrity who refused to shake dirty hands.

'Not bad, eh?'

Benoît poured himself another drink, which he began to sip slowly while gazing hesitantly at Maigret. As in belote, he seemed to be wondering which card was in his interest to play.

'That's more or less everything. Fleury told you his boss had taken the Calame Report to Boulevard Pasteur. You didn't dare go there at night because of the concierge, so the next morning you waited until she went out shopping. Did Mascoulin burn the report?'

'That's none of my business.'

'Whether he burned it or not is irrelevant, because he has a Photostat of it. That is enough to keep a certain number of people at his mercy.'

It was a mistake, Maigret realized later, to emphasize Mascoulin's

power. If he hadn't, might Benoît have adopted a different attitude? Probably not, but it was a chance to be taken.

'As predicted, the bombshell exploded. Other people were looking for the document, for various reasons, including a certain Tabard, who was the first to remember Calame's role and allude to it in his newspaper. You know that rat, Tabard, don't you? From the report, he stood to gain not power but a hefty sum of money.

'Labat, who works for him, must have been lurking near Madame Calame's apartment.

'Did he see Piquemal come out? I don't know and it is possible that we never will. Besides, it is of no importance. The fact remains that Labat sent one of his men to the widow's and then to the lodgings of the minister's secretary …

'You and your ilk remind me of a heap of crabs, crawling around in a basket.

'Others too were wondering more officially what exactly was going on, and they tried to find out.'

He was referring to Rue des Saussaies. It was natural that once the president of the Council was informed, a discreet investigation would be carried out by the Sûreté.

With hindsight, the situation was becoming almost comical. Three different groups had been trying to track down the report, each for their own particular reasons.

'The weak link was Piquemal, because it was hard to fathom whether he would talk, if questioned in a certain way.

'Was it your idea to bring him here? Was it Mascoulin's? You're not answering? Fine! It is of no consequence.

'At any rate, it was a matter of getting him out of the way for a while. I don't know how you went about it or what you told him.

'You will note that I am not questioning him. He'll talk when he's ready, in other words when he realizes that he has been a mere plaything in the hands of two crooks, one major and one minor.'

Piquemal shuddered but still said nothing.

'Now I've said all I have to say. We are outside the Seine département, as you will no doubt point out to me, and I am acting without any authority.'

He paused for a while, and then said:

'Handcuff him, Janvier.'

Benoît's initial reaction was to resist, and he was twice as strong as Janvier. On second thoughts, he held out his wrists with a groan.

‘This is going to cost you two dear. You’ll note that I haven’t said a word.’

‘Shut up. You, Piquemal, come with us as well. Even though you are free, I don’t suppose you intend to stay here alone?’

Once they were outside, it was Maigret who turned back to switch off the electricity.

‘Do you have the key?’ he asked. ‘It would be best to lock the door, because it will be some time before you come back fishing.’

They squeezed into the little car, and drove back to Paris in silence.

At Quai des Orfèvres, they found Fleury, still sitting on his chair, who gave a start on seeing the former inspector from Rue des Saussaies.

‘No need for me to introduce you,’ said Maigret.

It was 11.30 p.m. The Police Judiciaire headquarters were deserted, with the lights on in only two offices.

‘Call the ministry for me.’

Lapointe did so.

‘I’m passing you Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.’

‘Forgive me for disturbing you, minister. You weren’t in bed? Are you with your wife and daughter? … I’ve got news, yes … A lot … Tomorrow, you’ll be able to reveal to the Chamber the name of the man who broke into your apartment and stole the Calame Report … Not right away, no … Maybe in an hour’s time, maybe two … If you’d rather wait up for me … I can’t guarantee that it won’t take all night …’

It went on for three hours. Maigret and his men were now on familiar ground. They stayed all together in Maigret’s office for a long time, with Maigret doing the talking, pausing sometimes in front of one, sometimes in front of the other.

‘As you like, boys … I have all the time in the world. You take one, Janvier … Here, this one …’

He was pointing at Piquemal, who still hadn’t opened his mouth.

‘Lapointe, you deal with Monsieur Fleury.’

In each office were two men having a face-to-face conversation: the one asking, the other trying to say nothing.

It was a question of endurance. Sometimes Lapointe or Janvier would appear in the doorway and signal to Maigret, who would go out and talk to them in the corridor. They spoke in hushed voices.

‘I have three witnesses at least who will confirm my account,’

Maigret informed Benoît. ‘One of them – and this is important – is a resident at Boulevard Pasteur who saw you going into Point’s apartment. You’re still saying nothing?’

Benoît eventually said something that summed him up.

‘What would you do if you were in my shoes?’

‘If I were crooked enough to be in your shoes, I’d come clean.’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘You know very well.’

So as not to betray Mascoulin! Because he, as Benoît knew very well, would always manage to play his cards right, and goodness knows what would become of his accomplice.

‘Don’t forget that he’s the person who has the report.’

‘So?’

‘So, nothing. I’m keeping shtum. I’ll be sent down for burgling the apartment on Boulevard Pasteur. How long will I get?’

‘Around two years.’

‘As for Piquemal, he came with me of his own free will. I didn’t threaten him. So I didn’t kidnap him.’

Maigret realized that he would get no more out of him.

‘Do you admit that you went to Boulevard Pasteur?’

‘I’ll admit it if I have no option. That’s all.’

A few minutes later, he had no other option. Fleury had gone to pieces and Lapointe came in to let his chief know.

‘He knew nothing about Mascoulin and was unaware until tonight who Benoît was working for. He couldn’t refuse to help Benoît because of certain jobs he’d done with him in the past.’

‘Did you get him to sign a statement?’

‘I’m dealing with it.’

If Piquemal was an idealist, he was an idealist who had gone astray. He still refused to say a word. Was he also expecting to obtain something from Mascoulin?

At 3.30, leaving Janvier and Lapointe with the three men, Maigret took a taxi to Boulevard Saint-Germain, where a second-floor window was lit. Point had given orders for him to be shown up to his apartment immediately.

Maigret found the family in the small sitting room where they had received him previously.

Auguste Point, his wife and his daughter looked at him with tired eyes that did not yet dare shine with hope.

‘Have you got the document?’

‘No. But the man who stole it from Boulevard Pasteur is in my office and has confessed.’

‘Who is it?’

‘A former police officer turned rogue who works for various individuals.’

‘Who was he working for this time?’

‘Mascoulin.’

‘So …’ began Point, whose expression had become gloomy.

‘Mascoulin won’t say anything but will be content, when the need arises, to put pressure on those who are compromised. He’ll let Benoît go to jail. As for Fleury …’

‘Fleury?’

Maigret nodded.

‘He’s a pathetic fellow. He found himself in a position such that he couldn’t say no.’

‘I told you so,’ said Madame Point.

‘I know. I didn’t believe it.’

‘You’re not cut out for life in politics. When all this is over, I hope you—’

‘The main thing,’ said Maigret, ‘is to establish that you didn’t destroy the Calame Report and that you were telling the truth when you said it had been stolen from you.’

‘Will they believe him?’

‘Benoît will confess.’

‘Will he say who he was working for?’

‘No.’

‘Fleury neither?’

‘Fleury didn’t know.’

Which meant that …

A weight had just been lifted from his chest, but he wasn’t able to rejoice.

Maigret, admittedly, had saved his reputation. But Point had still lost the game.

Unless at the last minute Benoît decided to tell the whole story, which was highly unlikely, the real winner was still Mascoulin.

And he knew it so well that he had shown Maigret the Photostat machine deliberately before the latter had even reached the end of the investigation. It was a warning. It spelled out, in a way:

‘Take note, all concerned!’

All those who had something to fear from the publication of the report, whether it was Arthur Nicoud, still in Brussels, politicians or whoever, all of them now knew that Mascoulin only needed to lift a finger to bring them into disrepute and ruin their career.

There was a long drawn-out silence, and Maigret was not that proud of himself.

'In a few months' time, when all this is forgotten, I'll resign and go back to La Roche-sur-Yon,' mumbled Point, staring at the rug.

'Is that a promise?' exclaimed his wife.

'I swear it.'

She was delighted because, quite simply, her husband mattered more to her than anything else in the world.

'Can I telephone Alain?' asked Anne-Marie.

'At this hour?'

'Don't you think this is worth waking him up for?'

'If you think …'

She too probably didn't fully realize.

'Would you like something to drink?' muttered Point, glancing at Maigret almost shyly.

Their eyes met. Once again, Maigret had the impression he was facing someone who resembled him like a brother. They both had the same sad, heavy gaze, the same round shoulders.

The drink was just a pretext to sit down together for a moment. The daughter was telephoning.

'Yes … It's all over … You mustn't say anything yet … We have to give Papa the chance to surprise them in the Chamber …'

What could the two men have been saying to one another?

'To your health!'

'To yours, minister.'

Madame Point had left the room. It was not long before Anne-Marie joined her.

'I'm going home to bed,' muttered Maigret, rising. 'And you need to get some sleep even more than I do.'

Point proffered his hand, awkwardly, as if it were not an ordinary gesture, but the expression of a feeling of which he was ashamed.

'Thank you, Maigret.'

'I did what I could …'

'Yes …'

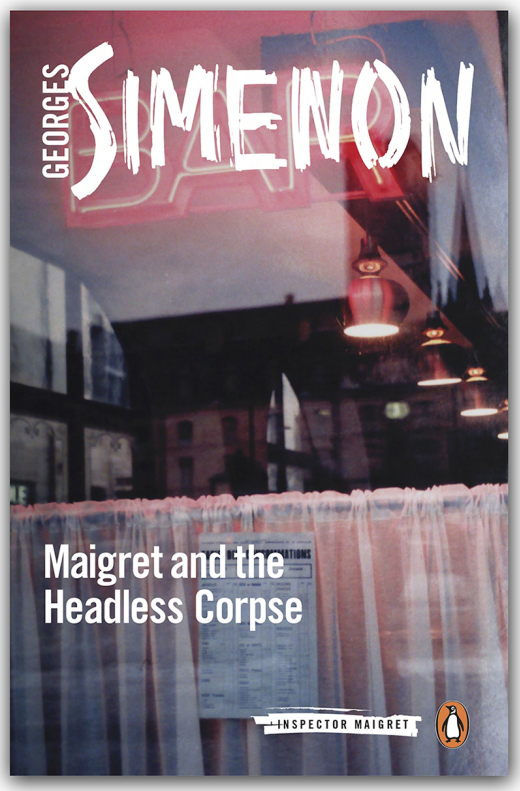
They walked over to the door.

'By the way, I also refused to shake his hand.'

Finally, once on the landing, as he turned away from his host: ‘He’ll get what’s coming to him one day …’

Read More

Mon ami
Maigret


GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret and the
Headless Corpse
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

1. The Naud Brothers' Discovery

The sky was just starting to lighten when Jules, the elder of the two Naud brothers, appeared on the deck of the barge, first his head, then his shoulders, then his big lanky body. Rubbing his as yet uncombed flax-coloured hair, he looked at the lock, Quai de Jemmapes on the left, Quai de Valmy on the right. A few minutes went by, time enough to roll a cigarette and smoke it in the coolness of the early morning, before a light came on in the little bar on the corner of Rue des Récollets.

Because of the dim light, the front of the bar was a harsher yellow than usual. Popaul, the owner, collarless and also uncombed, came out on to the pavement to remove the shutters.

Naud walked across the gangway and the quayside, rolling his second cigarette. When his brother Robert, almost as tall and raw-boned as he was, emerged in his turn from a hatch, he was able to see Jules leaning on the counter in the lighted bar and the owner pouring a shot of brandy into his coffee.

Robert seemed to be waiting his turn. He rolled a cigarette in the same way as his brother. When Jules came out of the bar, Robert, the younger of the two, walked off the barge, and they met in the middle of the street.

'I'm starting the engine,' Jules announced.

There were days when they didn't exchange more than ten sentences like that. Their boat was called the *Deux Frères* – the Two Brothers. They had married twin sisters, and both families lived on board.

Robert took the place of his elder brother in Popaul's bar, which smelled of coffee laced with brandy.

'Nice day,' said Popaul, who was short and fat.

Robert Naud merely looked through the window at the pink-tinged sky. The chimney pots on the roofs were the first thing in the

landscape to take on life and colour. On the slates and tiles, and on some of the cobbles on the quayside, the cold of the last hours of night had left a thin layer of frost that was starting to fade.

The diesel engine could be heard spluttering. Puffs of black smoke emerged from the stern of the barge. Robert put some coins on the zinc counter, touched his cap with his fingertips and walked back across the quayside. The lock-keeper had appeared, in his uniform, and was getting the lock ready. There was the sound of footsteps in the distance, on Quai de Valmy, although nobody was yet visible. Children's voices came from the interior of the boat, where the women were making coffee.

Jules reappeared on deck, went to the stern, leaned over and frowned. His brother guessed what was wrong. They had loaded some freestone at Beauval, at Post 48 along the Canal de l'Ourcq. As almost always happened, they had taken on a few tonnes too many, and already the previous day, leaving the basin of La Villette and moving into the Canal Saint-Martin, they had stirred the sludge at the bottom.

There is usually no lack of water in March. But this year, it hadn't rained for two months, and they had to be sparing with the canal water.

The lock gates opened. Jules took up his position at the wheel. His brother went back on to the quayside to cast off. The propeller started turning and, as both of them had feared, it stirred up thick mud that rose to the surface, making big bubbles.

Leaning with his whole weight on the pole, Robert tried hard to move the bow of the boat away from the quayside. The propeller seemed to be turning without any progress being made. Accustomed to such things, the lock-keeper waited patiently, beating his hands together to warm himself.

There was a thump, then a worrying noise of clashing gears. Robert Naud turned to his brother, who stalled the engine.

Neither of them knew what was happening. The propeller hadn't touched the bottom, protected as it was by part of the rudder. Something must have got stuck in it, perhaps an old cable, such as were often found lying at the bottom of canals. If it was that, they would find it hard to shake off.

Still holding his pole, Robert headed for the stern, leaned over and tried to reach the propeller through the opaque water, while Jules went looking for a smaller pole and Laurence, his wife, put

her head out through the hatch.

'What is it?'

'Don't know.'

In silence, they began to manoeuvre the two poles around the stalled propeller. After a few minutes, the lock-keeper, Dambois, whom everybody called Charles, came and stood on the quayside to watch them. He didn't ask any questions, merely puffed silently at his pipe, the stem of which had been mended with wire.

A few passers-by could be seen hurrying towards the République, as well as nurses in uniform heading for the Hôpital Saint-Louis.

'Have you got it?'

'I think so.'

'Is it a cable?'

'I have no idea.'

Jules Naud had hooked something. After a while, the object yielded, and more bubbles rose to the surface.

Slowly, he pulled out the pole, and as the hook broke the surface, a strange package appeared, wrapped in newspaper that had burst open.

It was a human arm, intact from the shoulder to the hand. In the water, it had taken on a pallid colour and the texture of a dead fish.

Depoil, the sergeant from the third district police station at the end of Quai de Jemmapes, was just finishing his night shift when the tall figure of the elder Naud brother appeared in the doorway.

'I'm just above the Récollets lock with our boat, the *Deux Frères*. The propeller stalled when we cast off and we dredged up a man's arm.'

Depoil, who had worked in the tenth arrondissement for fifteen years, had the reaction that all the police officers informed of the case would have.

'A man's?' he echoed, incredulously.

'A man's, yes. The hand is covered in brown hair and …'

Periodically, a corpse was fished out of the Canal Saint-Martin, almost always because of the movement of a boat's propeller. Most often, the corpse was intact, and it would usually turn out to be a man, an old tramp, for example, who had drunk too much and slipped into the canal, or a criminal stabbed to death by a rival gang.

Dismembered bodies weren't rare, two or three a year on

average, but invariably, as far back as Sergeant Depoil could remember, they were women. You immediately knew where to look. Nine times out of then, if not more, it was a low-class prostitute, one of those you see prowling at night around patches of waste ground.

'A sex crime,' the report would conclude.

The police knew the local crowd and had up-to-date lists of all the criminals and dubious individuals. A few days generally sufficed to arrest the perpetrator of an ordinary offence, whether it was a theft from a market stall or an armed attack. But it was rare for them to get their hands on one of these killers.

'Have you brought it with you?' Depoil asked.

'The arm?'

'Where did you leave it?'

'On the quayside. Is it all right for us to go? We have to get down to Quai de l'Arsenal. They're waiting for us to unload.'

The sergeant lit a cigarette, began by informing the police emergency switchboard of the incident, then asked for the number of the local detective chief inspector, Monsieur Magrin.

'Sorry to wake you. Some barge people have just fished a human arm out of the canal … No, a man's arm! … That's what I thought, too … What? … He's here, yes … I'll ask him …'

He turned to Naud, without letting go of the receiver.

'Does it look as if it's been in the water for a long time?'

The elder Naud scratched his head.

'That depends what you call a long time.'

'Is it very decomposed?'

'Hard to say. In my opinion, it could have been there about two or three days …'

The sergeant repeated this into the telephone.

'Two or three days …'

Then, playing with his pencil, he listened to the inspector's instructions.

'Can we go through the lock?' Naud asked again when he had hung up.

'Not yet. As the inspector just said, it's quite possible that other pieces have got stuck to the barge, and if we let it go ahead we might lose them.'

'But I can't stay there for ever! There are already four boats behind us.'

The sergeant, who had asked for another number, was waiting for the reply.

'Hello? Victor? Did I wake you? You're already having your breakfast? Good. I have a job for you.'

Victor Cadet lived not far from there, in Rue du Chemin-Vert, and a month rarely passed without his services being called for on the Canal Saint-Martin. Without any doubt, he was the man who had fished the largest number of ill-assorted objects, including human bodies, from the Seine and the canals of Paris.

'Just give me time to inform my assistant.'

It was seven o'clock in the morning. On Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, Madame Maigret, already washed and dressed and smelling of soap, was busy in her kitchen, making breakfast, while her husband was still asleep. At police headquarters on Quai des Orfèvres, Lucas and Janvier had come on duty at six, and it was Lucas who took the call about the discovery made in the canal.

'Strange!' he grunted to Janvier. 'They just fished an arm out of the Canal Saint-Martin, and it isn't a woman's.'

'Is it a man's?'

'What else could it be?'

'Could be a child's.'

That had happened, too, just once, three years earlier.

'Are you going to let the chief know?'

Lucas looked at the time, hesitated and shook his head. 'There's no rush. Let him at least have his coffee.'

By 7.50, a fairly large crowd had formed near the *Deux Frères*, and a policeman was keeping the onlookers at a distance from an object that lay on the flagstones, covered with a piece of tarpaulin. Victor Cadet's boat, which had been moored upstream, had been let through the lock and now came alongside the quay.

Cadet was a giant of a man. He looked as if he had had his diving suit made to measure. His assistant, on the other hand, was a little old man who chewed tobacco as he worked and sent long jets of brown saliva into the water.

It was he who secured the ladder, primed the pump and finally screwed the huge brass sphere on to Victor's neck.

Two women and five children, all with hair so blond it was almost white, were standing in the stern of the *Deux Frères*; one of the women was pregnant, the other held a baby on her arm.

The sunlight was beating down on the buildings along Quai de

Valmy, sunlight so bright and gay that it made you wonder why that stretch of the canal had such a sinister reputation. True, the paintwork on the fronts of the buildings was faded, the whites and yellows pale and washed out, but on this March morning, everything seemed as bright and clear as a painting by Utrillo.

Four barges were waiting behind the *Deux Frères*, with washing drying on lines and children being forced to keep quiet. The smell of tar dominated the less pleasant smell of the canal.

At 8.15, Maigret, who was finishing his second cup of coffee and wiping his mouth before smoking his first pipe, took the call from Lucas.

'A man's arm, you say?'

He, too, was surprised.

'Was anything else found?'

'Victor the diver is already at work. We have to clear the lock as soon as possible to avoid a bottleneck.'

'Who's been dealing with this so far?'

'Judel.'

He was an inspector from the tenth arrondissement, a dull but conscientious young man who could be relied on in the early stages of an investigation.

'Are you going over there, chief?'

'It's not a big detour.'

'Do you want one of us to join you there?'

'Who's in the office?'

'Janvier, Lemaire … Wait. Lapointe has just come in.'

Maigret hesitated for a moment. Here, too, it was sunny, and they had been able to half open the window. The case might be trivial and straightforward. If it was, Judel could continue to handle it. It's hard to know at the beginning! If the arm had been a woman's, Maigret wouldn't have hesitated to wager that the rest would be routine.

But because it was a man's arm, anything was possible. And if the case turned out to be a complicated one, if Maigret decided to take charge of the investigation, what happened in the next few days would depend partly on the choice he was about to make, because he preferred to continue and finish an investigation with the inspector who had begun it with him.

'Send Lapointe.'

It was a while since he had last worked closely with Lapointe,

whose youth entertained him, as did his enthusiasm – and his embarrassment when he thought he had committed a blunder.

'Shall I inform the commissioner?'

'Yes. I'll probably be late for the briefing.'

It was 23 March. Spring had officially begun two days earlier, and you could already feel it in the air, which couldn't be said every year. It was so warm that Maigret almost went out without a coat.

Out on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, he hailed a taxi. There was no direct bus route, and this wasn't the kind of weather for shutting yourself up in the Métro. As he expected, he got to the Récollets lock before Lapointe. He found Inspector Judel leaning over the dark water of the canal.

'Anything else been found?'

'Not yet, chief. Victor's busy going all around the barge to make sure nothing's stuck to it.'

Ten more minutes went by. Lapointe was just emerging from one of the Police Judiciaire's little black cars when clear bubbles announced that Victor was about to break surface.

His assistant hastened to unscrew the brass helmet. Immediately, Victor lit a cigarette, looked around, recognized Maigret and gave him a friendly wave.

'Anything else?'

'Not in this area.'

'Can the barge go on its way?'

'I'm pretty certain it won't hit anything, apart from the sludge at the bottom.'

Robert Naud, who had heard this, yelled to his brother:

'Start the engine.'

Maigret turned to Judel.

'Do you have their statements?'

'Yes. They've both signed. In any case, they'll be spending at least four days unloading on Quai de l'Arsenal.'

That was just over two kilometres downstream, between the Bastille and the Seine.

It took some time to get the boat moving, as its bilge was too full and kept scraping the bottom, but at last it was in the lock, and the gates were closed.

Most of the onlookers were starting to move away. Those who remained had nothing to do and would probably be there all day.

Victor hadn't taken off his rubber suit.

'If there are other pieces,' he said, 'they're further upstream. The thighs, the trunk, the head – they're all heavier than an arm and are less likely to be dragged along.'

No current was visible on the surface of the canal, and the rubbish floating on it seemed motionless.

'There isn't a current like in a river, of course. But with every sluice, the water moves almost invisibly all along the reach.'

'So we'd have to search all the way to the next lock?'

'The authorities pay, and you give the orders,' Victor said, puffing at his cigarette.

'Will it take long?'

'It depends where I find the rest of him. That's if the rest of him is in the canal, obviously!'

Why would part of the body have been thrown in the canal and the rest on a patch of waste ground, for example?

'Carry on.'

Cadet signalled to his assistant to moor the boat a little further upstream and got ready to put the brass helmet on again.

Maigret took Judel and Lapointe aside. They formed a little group on the quayside, and the onlookers watched them with the respect people unconsciously show to those in official positions.

'Just in case, you should have the waste grounds and building sites in the area searched thoroughly.'

'I already thought of that,' Judel said. 'I was just waiting for your instructions to start.'

'How many men do you have?'

'This morning, two. By this afternoon, I can have three.'

'Try to find out if there have been any fights locally in the last few days, if anyone heard any screams, calls for help.'

'Yes, chief.'

Maigret left the uniformed officer to keep watch on the human arm that still lay on the quayside under a tarpaulin.

'Coming, Lapointe?'

He walked to Popaul's, the bar on the corner, which was painted a bright red, and opened the glass door. A number of factory workers from the area, already in their work clothes, were having a bite to eat at the counter.

'What can I get you?' the owner hastened to ask.

'Do you have a telephone?'

As he spoke, he saw it. It was attached to the wall, not in a booth but right next to the counter.

'Come on, Lapointe.'

He had no desire to make a call in public.

'Aren't you having a drink?'

Popaul looked offended.

'Later,' Maigret promised him.

All along the quayside there were one-storey houses, as well as apartment blocks, workshops and big concrete buildings containing offices.

'We're bound to find a bistro with a phone booth.'

They continued on their way. On the other side of the canal, the faded flag and blue lamp of the police station came into view, with the dark mass of the Hôpital Saint-Louis behind it.

They walked almost 300 metres before finding a dim-looking bistro. Maigret pushed open the door. They had to go down two stone steps. The floor consisted of little dark-red tiles, the kind found in buildings in Marseille.

There was nobody in the room, only a big ginger cat lying near the stove. It rose lazily, padded towards a half-open door and disappeared.

'Is there anyone here?' Maigret called.

They could hear the rapid ticking of a cuckoo clock. The air smelled of brandy and white wine, brandy more than wine, with a whiff of coffee.

There was movement in a back room. A woman's voice said, with a touch of weariness:

'Just coming!'

The ceiling was low and smoke-dulled, the walls blackened, the room shrouded in a semi-darkness crossed by a few sunbeams, like the light through stained-glass windows in a church. There was a piece of cardboard stuck to the wall, on which were the words, roughly written:

Light meals throughout the day

And, on another notice:

Customers may bring their own food

Right now, nobody seemed tempted by this proposition. Maigret and Lapointe were probably the first customers of the day. There was a phone booth in a corner. Maigret wouldn't go to it until the

woman appeared.

When at least she arrived, she was just finishing sticking pins in her dark brown, almost black hair. She was thin and ageless, forty or forty-five perhaps, and she came towards them with a glum expression on her face, her felt slippers dragging over the tiles.

'What do you want?'

Maigret looked at Lapointe.

'Is the white wine good?'

She shrugged.

'Two glasses of white wine. Do you have a telephone token?'

He went and shut himself in the booth and called the prosecutor's office to make his verbal report. The man at the other end of the line was a deputy, and he expressed the same surprise as everyone else on learning that the arm fished out of the canal was a man's.

'There's a diver searching at the moment. He thinks the rest of the body, if it's there at all, is somewhere upstream. I'd like personally for Dr Paul to examine the arm as soon as possible.'

'Can I call you back where you are? I'll try and get hold of him right away and come back to you.'

The number was on the telephone. He gave it to the deputy and walked back to the counter, where two glasses had been poured.

'Cheers!' he said, turning to the woman.

She didn't appear to have heard him. She was looking at them without any friendliness, waiting for them to go so that she could return to whatever it was she had been doing, most likely getting dressed.

She must have been pretty once. At least, like everyone, she had been young. Now her eyes, her mouth, her whole body exuded weariness. Could it be that she was ill and waiting for her next attack? Some people who know that at a particular hour they are going to start suffering again have that expression, subdued and yet tense, like drug addicts waiting for the hour of their dose.

'I'm expecting a phone call,' Maigret said as if to apologize.

It was a public place, of course, like all bars and cafés, a place that was somehow anonymous, and yet they both had the impression that they were intruding, that they had arrived somewhere they didn't belong.

'Your wine's good.'

It was true. Most bistros in Paris advertise a 'locally produced wine', but more often than not it's a doctored wine straight from

the warehouses at Bercy. This one, though, had a distinctive flavour that Maigret was trying to identify.

'Sancerre?' he asked.

'No. It comes from a little village near Poitiers.'

That was why it had an aftertaste of flint.

'Do you have family there?'

She didn't reply, and Maigret admired the way she was able to remain motionless, looking at them in silence, with no expression on her face. The cat had come to join her and rubbed against her bare legs.

'Where's your husband?'

'As it happens, he's gone to get some.'

Get some wine, was what she meant. It wasn't easy to maintain the conversation. Just as Maigret was motioning to her to refill the glasses, the telephone came to his rescue.

'Yes, speaking. Did you get hold of Paul? … Is he free? … In an hour? Good, I'll be there.'

What he heard next made him pull a face. The deputy was telling him that the case had been entrusted to Judge Coméliau, almost Maigret's personal enemy, the fussiest, most conformist magistrate in the prosecutor's office.

'He's expressly asked you to keep him informed.'

'I know.'

That meant that Maigret would receive five or six telephone calls from Coméliau every day, and that he would have to go to his office every morning to bring him up to date.

'All right,' he sighed. 'We'll do our best!'

'It's not my fault, inspector. He was the only judge available and …'

The sunbeam had moved slightly and now hit Maigret's glass.

'Let's go!' he said, taking money from his pocket. 'What do I owe you?'

And once they were outside:

'Did you bring the car?'

'Yes. It's parked near the lock.'

The wine had put colour in Lapointe's cheeks, and his eyes were a little shiny. From where they were, they could see a group of onlookers on the quayside watching the diver's movements. When Maigret and the inspector came level with them, Victor's assistant pointed to a package lying on the deck of the boat, a bulkier

package than the first one.

'A leg and a foot,' he said, spitting in the water.

The wrapping was less damaged than with the first discovery, and Maigret didn't feel the need to examine it closely.

'Do you think it's worth calling for a van?' he asked Lapointe.

'There must be room in the boot.'

The idea didn't appeal to either of them, but nor did they want to keep Dr Paul waiting. He was expecting them at the Forensic Institute, a bright modern building on the banks of the Seine, not far from the place where the canal joins the river.

'What shall I do?' Lapointe asked.

Maigret preferred to say nothing. Overcoming his revulsion, Lapointe carried the two packages, one after the other, to the boot of the car.

'Do they smell?' Maigret asked him when he returned to the quayside.

And Lapointe, who was holding his hands away from his body, wrinkled his nose and nodded.

Dr Paul was in his white coat and rubber gloves, chain smoking. He liked to say that tobacco is one of the most reliable antiseptics, and in the course of a post-mortem he sometimes got through two whole packets of cigarettes.

Bent over the marble table, working with enthusiasm and even good humour, he spoke between puffs on his cigarette.

'Of course, nothing I can tell you now is final. First of all, I'd like to see the rest of the body, which will tell us more than an arm and a leg, and secondly, before I express a firm opinion, I'd need to run a number of tests.'

'How old?'

'As far as I can judge at first sight, the man must have been between fifty and sixty, closer to fifty than sixty. Look at this hand.'

'What am I looking for?'

'It's a wide, strong hand which must have done heavy manual work at some time.'

'A factory worker.'

'No. More likely a farm labourer. I'd wager, though, that it's been many years since this hand last held a heavy tool. The man didn't exactly look after himself, as you can see from the nails, especially the toenails.'

‘A tramp?’

‘I don’t think so. I repeat: I’d need to see the rest, if it’s found, before I could state a firm opinion.’

‘How long ago did he die?’

‘Again, this is just a hypothesis. Don’t get carried away, I might tell you the opposite tonight or tomorrow. For the moment, I’d say three days, no more than that. And I’d be tempted to say less.’

‘Not last night?’

‘No. But the night before last, maybe.’

Maigret and Lapointe were also smoking, avoiding looking down at the marble slab as far as possible. Dr Paul, though, seemed to enjoy his work, handling his tools with the skill of a conjuror.

He was about to get back into his everyday clothes when Maigret was called to the telephone. It was Judel, from Quai de Valmy.

‘They’ve found the torso!’ he announced, sounding quite excited.

‘Not the head?’

‘Not yet. Victor says that may be more difficult. The weight will have sunk it deeper in the sludge. He also found an empty wallet and a woman’s handbag.’

‘Near the trunk?’

‘No. Quite far. There doesn’t seem to be any connection. Like he says, every time he dives in the canal, he could bring enough things up to the surface to start a stall at the flea market. Just before finding the trunk, he brought up a metal bedstead and two wash basins.’

Paul was waiting before taking his gloves off, holding his hands apart.

‘Something new?’ he asked.

Maigret nodded. Then, to Judel:

‘Can you get it to me at the Forensic Institute?’

‘Possibly …’

‘I’ll wait here. Make it quick, because Dr Paul …’

They waited in the main doorway, where the air was cooler and more pleasant and from where they could watch the constant bustle on Pont d’Austerlitz. On the other side of the Seine, some barges and a little sea-going boat were unloading goods outside the bonded warehouses. There was something young, something lively, in the rhythm of Paris this morning. A season was starting, a brand-new spring, and people were optimistic.

‘No tattoos or scars, I assume?’

‘Not on the parts I’ve examined, no. From his skin, I’d say he was a man who lived indoors.’

‘He seems quite hairy.’

‘Yes. I can almost describe to you the kind of person he was. Dark-skinned, not very tall, short but stocky, with bulging muscles, thick dark air on the arms, hands, legs and chest. The French countryside produces lots of people like that: sturdy, wilful, stubborn. I’m curious to see his head.’

‘When we find it!’

A quarter of an hour later, two uniformed officers brought them the trunk. Dr Paul was almost rubbing his hands as he walked to the marble slab like a cabinetmaker to his work bench.

‘This confirms we aren’t dealing with a professional job,’ he muttered. ‘I mean the man wasn’t cut up by a butcher, or by a specialist from La Villette, let alone a surgeon! For the bones, an ordinary metal saw was used. For the rest, they seem to have used a big carving knife, the kind that’s found in restaurants and in most kitchens. It must have taken a while. They had to start again several times.’

He paused.

‘Look at this hairy chest …’

Maigret and Lapointe merely glanced at it.

‘No obvious wounds?’

‘I can’t see any. What’s certain, of course, is that the man didn’t die from drowning.’

It was almost funny. The idea that a man whose body parts had been found in the canal might have actually drowned …

‘I’ll look at the internal organs later, in particular, in so far as I can, the stomach contents. Are you staying?’

Maigret shook his head. It wasn’t a spectacle he particularly enjoyed, and he was in urgent need of a drink, not wine this time, but something a lot stronger, to get rid of the bad taste he had in his mouth, a taste he thought of as a corpse taste.

‘Hold on a bit, Maigret … What was I saying? … You see this lighter line, and these small pale spots on the stomach?’

Maigret said yes without looking.

‘The line is the scar left by an operation performed several years ago. An operation for appendicitis.’

‘And the spots?’

‘That’s the oddest thing. I can’t swear I’m right, but I’m almost

sure they're marks left by shotgun pellets. That would confirm that the man lived in the countryside at some time in his life, a farm labourer or a gamekeeper, something like that. A long time ago, twenty years, maybe more, he must have been fired at with a shotgun. I count seven … no, eight scars of the same kind, in a rainbow arc. I've only seen that once before, and it wasn't as regular. I'll have to take a photograph of it for my records.'

'Will you phone me?'

'Where will you be? At headquarters?'

'Yes, at the office. And I'll probably have lunch on Place Dauphine.'

'I'll call you and let you know what I've discovered.'

Once they were outside, in the sun, Maigret was the first to wipe his forehead. Lapointe was unable to stop himself from spitting several times as if he, too, had an acrid taste in his mouth.

'I'll have the boot of the car disinfected as soon as we get to headquarters,' he said.

Before getting in the car, they went into a bistro and had a glass of marc. It was so strong that Lapointe retched and held his hand in front of his mouth for a moment, his eyes filled with anxiety, wondering if he wasn't going to vomit.

At last he regained his composure.

'I beg your pardon,' he stammered.

As they were going out, the owner of the bar said to one of his customers:

'More people who came to identify a body. They all react like that.'

Located as he was just opposite the Forensic Institute, he was used to it.

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